PREACHING HEALING TO HURTING WOMEN: A WOMANIST HERMENEUTICAL AND HOMILETICAL APPROACH TO MINISTRY WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

The Reverend Margarett Elaine McCollins Flake, DMin
BA, Fisk University, 1970
MA, Boston University, 1971
MDiv, Union Theological Seminary, 1993

Mentors
Clarice Martin, Ph.D.
William Myers, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

This document shows that womanist biblical hermeneutics serves as a "balm" for African American Christian women as they struggle with various levels of woundedness. Exploring the historical and contemporary significance of womanist biblical interpretation in the lives of African American Christian women, the study shows that those who preach to them have an obligation to reject misogynist readings, and employ interpretive methodologies that are sensitive to the Black female experience. Using verbal and written responses of a group of women from Allen A. M. E. Church, this project also reveals the interconnectedness of preaching grounded in liberating interpretive strategies and the "healing" of the women who hear.

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this study is to focus on "womanist preaching" as a praxiological response to womanist theology and womanist biblical hermeneutics. The challenge is for African American preachers, female and male, to abandon traditional and oppressive interpretive methodologies that have been insensitive to the black-female-experience. The goal is to provide the theoretical paradigm which will enable all African American homileticians to understand and assume their moral and spiritual responsibility of preaching toward the empowerment and liberation to one of the most oppressed of an oppressed community -- marginalized and "hurting women."

Chapter One of this project, entitled "Black Women's Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections from the 19th Century," examines the biblical interpretation and liberation theology that evolved among Black women from antebellum and postbellum America. While the term "womanist" is of twentieth century nomenclature, womanist thinking has existed from the time that Black women experienced racism and sexism in America. From the very first time that African slave women were introduced to

Christianity and the biblical text, they developed reading and interpretive strategies which allowed them to discover a God very different from the slave owner's God: they fashioned their own Christianity, shaped by their "innate reading" and interpretation of scripture. Even when many were unable to read and were dependent on outside sources for reading and interpretation, Black people did not accept all "outside" interpretation of scripture. They would appropriate and process the biblical text according to their own understanding of God. As the voices of Mary Prince, Linda Brent, Harriet Tubman and others emerge from the past to share the historical realities of the independent and thinking "Black-woman-community, we hear an articulation and spirit that foreshadows, frames and informs contemporary womanist thinking and biblical interpretation. Highlighted in this chapter are Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee, two of the most extraordinary women of the antebellum period whose experiences with and resistance to race and gender oppression are at the center of a self-definition and a self-consciousness that laid the foundations for an epistemology that emphasizes Black female empowerment.

Chapter Two, "Biblical and Exegetical Foundations for Preaching Healing to Hurting Women," was developed to show how the Bible continues to contribute to and shape womanist thinking and theological efforts on behalf of Black women's liberation. Since traditional biblical interpretation has

been done from the perspective of the Eurocentric culture, reflecting its beliefs, values and concerns, the womanist scholar and preacher must coalesce to ensure that the biblical text speaks to the African-American community, and addresses their hopes, values and concerns. Womanist's understanding that the Bible is not politically or ideologically neutral, constrains them to offer readings and interpretations of the text that are empowering and affirming to all Black people, male and female. Thus, Black women have developed a "Black woman's hermeneutic" which has authenticated their own history and contemporary realities. Womanist preaching and theological explorations have allowed the Bible to speak to African-American women's experiences; they have determined that those experiences will shape their hermeneutic.

Chapter Three, "Womanist Theological Perspectives," reveals how African-American women have fought to deconstruct the conceptual contrivances of the larger society about them, and have provided for themselves and the dominant group new perceptions of Black women's realities. Womanist theology is one avenue of self-definition and affirmation that has emerged among African-American Christian women. In this chapter, womanist theologians are engaged as they have expressed themselves within the context of their own history and experiences with racism and sexism in the Church society. As a dynamic response to Black

women's oppression within the theological perspectives of feminist and Black liberation theologies, womanist theology represents Black women's determination to seek liberation from racist, classist and sexist structures.

Chapters Four, Five and Six represent the practical and contextual application of the theoretical findings evolving in the first three chapters. Chapter Four, "The Design and Implementation of Model of Ministry," reveals how "the-preaching-healing-to-hurting-women-model" was implemented in the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica, New York. Chapter Five gives the results of the study and offers a detailed analysis of the process. Lastly, Chapter Six summarizes the results of the study, and delineates the learnings that this study provided.

CHAPTER ONE

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: BLACK WOMEN'S THEOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS FROM THE 19TH CENTURY

Upon their arrival in North America, African slaves were introduced to a religion and a Bible that supported and validated their enslavement. Slaveholders used the biblical text to establish a proslavery ideology and hermeneutic that they argued was in no way antithetical to the will of God. In fact, the Christian oppressor's hermeneutical misrepresentations of Scripture fashioned ideological constructs that justified their treatment of slaves and rationalized slavocracy as divine and acceptable. While on the one hand, they espoused a belief that all humans were created equal and were from birth unfettered by social and racial restrictions, on the other hand, they argued that Blacks[1] were irredeemably inferior to Whites and should be positioned outside of the parameters of human status.

Central to the "dehumanization of Blacks" hermeneutic

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[1]In this document, the words "Black" and "African American" are essentially used interchangeably. However, because the term "African American" is of twentieth century nomenclature, "Black is most often the term used to refer to people of African descent in the nineteenth century. Also, "Black" and "White" will be capitalized throughout this document, except in those cases where it appears in lower case within a citation.

was the biblical story of the curse of Ham (Genesis 9:20-29). The widespread belief was that Africans were of the lineage of Canaan, and his father, Ham, and were thus under divine punishment.

> *"he said 'Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.' He also said, 'Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Cannan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.'" (Genesis 9:25-27)*[2]

This Hamitic hypothesis offered a scriptural justification for slavery, while establishing the slaveholders in divine approval. The assumption was that Jews and Gentiles were the descendants of Shem and Japheth. In her discussion of "the mythology of Black inferiority," Katie Cannon notes:

> *The Ham story in Genesis 9:25-27 was not only used to legitimize slavery in general, but it was also used by proslavery, prowhite supremacists to justify the enslavement of Blacks in particular. Ham became widely identified as the progenitor of the Black race and the story of the curse which Noah pronounced against Canaan, the son of his son, Ham, was symbolically linked to the institution of racial slavery.... Christians caught in the obsessive duality of understanding Black people as property rather than as persons concurred with both faulty exegesis and social pressure that depicted people with Black skin as demonic, unholy, infectious progenitors of sin, full of animality and matriarchal proclivities.*[3]

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[2]All scriptural citations in this document are taken from The New Oxford Annotated Bible (New Revised Standard Version), eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[3] Katie Geneva Cannon, "Slave Ideology and Biblical Interpretation," Semeia 47 (1989), ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 11-12.

The religion of slavocracy also legitimized Black oppression by developing a hermeneutic that maintained that because there is no prohibition of slavery in the Bible and because neither the Old Testament Law, the teachings of Jesus, the apostles or the epistle writers named slavery as sin, slaveholding was permissible. The popular interpretive principles among White Christians reinforced the belief that Black folk were innately inferior, should be treated as possessions and not humans, and that heaven approved of slavery as conventional and just. In fact, the hope and the intent of the slave masters' reading was to make Blacks better slaves.

Just as the Black Church was founded in the midst of slavery, so did a Black hermeneutic emerge in response to the slave tradition. Upon their introduction to Christianity, African slaves developed their own theological constructs that confirmed their own God-reality. They developed reading strategies and interpretations that embraced and appropriated traditional liberation paradigms and ideologies, and rejected any interpretation that oppressed or devalued them. Instinctively, their understanding of Divinity empowered them to create alternatives to the oppressive theology of White Christians. Accordingly, Dwight N. Hopkins writes:

> *Enslaved African Americans creatively forged their own understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and the purpose of humanity. Through scriptural insights, theological imagination, and direct contact with God, black*

> *bondsmen and bondwomen combined faith instincts from their African traditional religions with the justice message of the Christian gospel and planted seeds for a black theology ....*[4]

The slaves' reinterpretation of White religion and its biblical hermeneutic yielded a theological tradition that gave rise to a Black Biblical Hermeneutic that would make their desire for freedom and authentic human existence natural and divine. Implementing their own unique reading and interpretation of scripture, Bible-reading Blacks responded to the inadequacy and falsity of the White America's "hermeneutic of oppression" by developing a subjective biblical interpretation or "bibliomancy."[5] *They accommodated the Bible to address their experiences of oppression and pain, birthing a hermeneutic that established the liberating essence of the Gospel and exposed the hypocrisy of White religion. For the Christian African slave the Bible contained an indisputable truth: God was the God of the oppressed.*

The liberating essence of the Bible provided African American Christian Women with a God-reality that supported

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[4]Dwight N. Hopkins, Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 13.

[5]"Bibliomancy" is a term used by Vincent Wimbush, in his article, "The Bible and African Americans," in Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation, ed. Cain Hope Felder, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1991), 93. He defines it as the reading of holy books for the purpose of solving personal problems or in order to effect some wonder from which one can benefit.

their struggle for authentic human existence. This understanding of the nature of God inspired them to use an interpretive process and methodology that spoke to their experiences. They began to confront the patriarchal system at its core, as they struggled to live under a system that would deny their personhood and obstruct their freedom. Refusing to bow to the brutality of racism and sexism, they embarked on the homiletical journey to social justice, with Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth being two of the major contributors to the process.

The Bible And Slave Women

Every promise in the Book is mine.
Every chapter, every verse, every line.
I am standing on the promises divine.
Every promise in the Book is mine.[6]

This song that had its birth in the African American Church tradition and culture expresses one of the pervasive realities of Black religious thought. From the time that they were introduced to the Christian religion and the Holy Bible, "men and women in slave society found meanings in the promises of Scripture; they became one with the Christian

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[6]As a child , I heard this song sung in several Black churches in Memphis, Tennessee. I have never seen it written, but I am told that it is widely sung in the Church of God in Christ.

epic."[7] *Since many were not able to read initially, the slaves' earliest experiences with scripture were oral, communicated through public readings or sermons by Whites. Although they were usually dependent on outside sources for biblical reading, Black folk did not accept all "outside" interpretation of the scripture as truth; they were distrustful of the White folks' interpretation of the Scriptures and wanted to search them for themselves.*[8] *Their search led them to discover a God very different from the slave owner's God, and thus they fashioned their own Christianity, shaped by their "innate reading" and interpretation of scripture.*

Because they were as much acquainted with the indignities of slavery as was the Black man, Black female slaves did not hesitate to voice their complaints and their pain centered around that oppression. Experiences with abuse, sexual brutalization, and bondage made them reliable authorities on slave-life in general and female oppression in particular. The historical accounts of Mary Prince reveal her as a woman committed to breaking the silence of the female slave, believing that her experience gave her

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[7]Bert Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, "Sources of Inner Wholeness," in Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life (University Park: University Park State University Press, 1988), 9.

[8]Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion, (New York: Oxford Press, 1989), 239-240.

the right to speak. She recorded her story of oppression and her thoughts about that oppression in narrative forms. Her writings voice the realities of what slaves really felt.

> *"How can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and the whip upon their back? and are disgraced and thought no more of than beasts?.... All slaves want to be free--to be free is very sweet... I have been a slave myself--and I know what slaves feel--I can tell by myself what other slaves feel...."*[9]

Not only does Prince hold the distinction of being the first Black woman to publish a slave narrative, she also has the distinction of being the first Black woman to have the audacity to speak for all slaves, men as well as women.

It was a natural proclivity toward freedom that was described in Prince's testimony. She had an irrepressible determination to realize the freedom which transformed the structure of "traditional" religious thought. Amazingly, the Black female slave did not have to depend on the White or the Black preacher to inspire her to challenge White biblical traditions; she was able to appropriate and process the biblical text from within the context of her experience and understanding of God. As the oppressed female encountered the "White hermeneutic of oppression," very often a deep resentment for the White preacher grew. A slave woman by the name of Nancy was unflinching in her

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[9]Mary Prince, "The History of Mary Prince," in The Classic Slave Narratives, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 214.

rejection of White preaching and her belief that slaves could hear God for themselves.

> *"That ol' white preachin wasn't nothin'..... ol' white preacher used to talk with their tongues without saying nothin', but Jesus told us slaves to talk with our hearts."*[10]

In another instance, one slave girl named Linda Brent, who heard a White missionary read and preach from the Pauline scripture that admonished "slaves to be obedient to their master," instinctively applied her own "hermeneutic of liberation" that made it evident to her that any biblical interpretation which promoted slavery was not to be taken seriously. After hearing a preacher proclaim: "Obey your old master and your young master--your old mistress and your young mistress..... You must obey God's commandment...." the response to the sermon was "light."

> *"The benediction was pronounced. We went home, highly amused at brother Pike's gospel teaching,...."*[11]

Influenced by her grandmother's consciousness, Brent's innate self-respect and hatred of the slave system led to a "passive" insurgency which would know no compromise. This Black Christian woman's spiritual connection with God was

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[10]This narrative is cited by Julius Lester in To Be a Slave (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 79.

[11]Linda Brent, "Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl,'" edited by Maria Child in The Classic Slave Narratives, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 398.

such that she felt completely justified and comfortable with her rejection of any scripture that seemed to promote slavery.

Slaves learned to use scripture as a means of resisting the oppressive and dehumanizing impact of slavery. As the "true" message of the Christian Gospel was internalized, they produced songs and sermons that appropriated various scripture stories to their own experiences and understanding of "the God of the slave." It was in the spirituals, above all, that the characters, themes, and lessons of the Bible became dramatically real and took on special meaning for the slaves."[12] *As the Bible became a dominant force in the life of the slave, many of the biblical stories provided hope for Black women -- hope for escape from the misery of the day to day existence. They sang:*

> *Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,*
> *Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?*
> *Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,*
> *Then why not every man?*
>
> *He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,*
> *Jonah from the belly of the whale,*
> *The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,*
> *Then why not every man?*

That Black women sang, "And before I'll be a slave, I be buried in my grave..." demonstrates not only their rejection of the Eurocentric reading and interpretation of scripture, but it also further affirms that her instinct and overall

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[12]Ibid., 243.

aural experience with the Bible had yielded a desire for authentic human existence that was so great that even death would be a welcomed alternative to bondage. Out of her own sense of God and instinct for survival, the Black woman gained her own sense of identity and developed her own biblical hermeneutic, independent of White social and religious tradition. Thus, the Black woman's interpretation and hermeneutic made it easy for her to reject slavery without rejecting her God or her Bible.

One dimension of female oppression that had its beginnings in slavocracy and has shaped the experiences of women of African ancestry in this country is the obsession of White and Black men to dominate Black women's sexuality. "Traditionally, freedom for Black women has meant freedom from white men...."[13] *and their sexual exploitation. It is of particular importance to note that while both Black men and women were brutally exploited during slavery, the African woman suffered the additional indignity of being sexual assaulted by their White oppressor. Angela Davis writes:*

> *As females, slave women were inherently vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion. If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped. Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the over-*

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[13]Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191.

seers control over Black women as workers.[14]

Being vulnerable to rape and other forms of abuse that could only be inflicted on females, made the African slave woman's experience in this country uniquely different from that of her male counterpart. It would be a mistake to assume that the rape of Black women during slavery was an expression of their White masters' sexual lust; it was an expression of the slaveholder's determination for power and control. It was a means of keeping the women in their places--submissive, oppressed and repressed. This systematic violence against women during slavery laid the foundation for the continued sexual objectification of African-American women that continues into the present. In addition, while the Genesis account of the Abraham saga (Genesis 16 and 21: 1-21) represented another biblical story that was one of the rationales of the proslavery argument, it is probable that Abraham's exploitation of the Egyptian slavewoman, Hagar, provided the patriarchal paradigm for the male slaveholder's abuse and exploitation of female slaves. Just as Hagar had no control over her body, her descendants were destined to have no control over their bodies.

The chronicle of Linda Brent sheds light on the Black female's struggle against "ownership" and objectification. While he never actually raped her, harassment and torture

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[14]Angela Y. Davis, Women, Race and Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 7.

were the techniques that her owner, Dr. Flint, used to make Brent submit to his desire. Offering her "things" in exchange for sex, Flint was obsessed with the notion that his slaves were his property and should submit to his every command. She describes his determination to make her yield to him.

> *He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master.... He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things.*[15]

African-American women were not passive in the face of bondage and abuse. The biblical interpretative strategies of Christian slave women assured them that this violation of their bodies and spirits was an offense to God, and their understanding of God and scripture gave them the confidence to resist the wanton attacks on their personhood. Of course, since these forced sexual encounters were legal, slave women had no recourse but their own forms of resistance. "And they were not afraid to let their religion express itself in the rebellious action they caused."[16] *Paula Giddens comments on this slave/slave resistance phenomenon.*

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[15]Brent, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," 361.

[16]Delores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993, 136.

> *"So by the early eighteenth century, an incredible social, legal and racial structure was put in place. Women were firmly stratified in the roles that Plato envisioned. Blacks were chattel, White men could give birth to a slave. Blacks constituted a permanent labor force and metaphor that were perpetuated through the the Black woman's womb. And all of this was done within the context of the Church, the operating laws of capitalism, and psychological needs of White males. Subsequent history would be a variation on the same theme.*
> *....Black women proved especially adept at poisoning their masters, a skill undoubtedly imported from Africa. Incendiarism was another favorite method; it required neither brute physical strength nor direct confrontation. But Black women used every means available to resist slavery--as men did-- and if caught, were punished as harshly.*[17]

The thinking that slavery was an abomination to God and that God was on the side of the slave was certainly the motivation for the freedom and abolitionist efforts of women of color. After having escaped from her master's plantation in Maryland, Harriet Tubman believed that "God spoke with her in such a way that she believed that her own liberated existence.... contained a void as long as the remainder of her former slave community languished under the whimsical whips of wicked Whites down south.[18]

> *"Long 'go when de Lord tole me to go free my people I said, 'No Lord! I can't go--don't ask me' But he come anoder time. I saw him jes as plain. Den I said again, 'Lord, go away--get some better edicated person--get a person wid more cultur dan I have; go way, Lord.' But he came back de third,*

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[17]Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (Toronto: Bantam Book, 1984), 39.

[18]Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 36.

> *and speaks to me jess as he did to Moses, and he says,: 'Harriet, I wants you,' and I knew den I must do what he bid me. Now do you s'pose he wanted me to do dis jess for a day, or a week? No! de Lord who tole me take care of my people meant me to do it jess so long as I live, and so I do what he told me to."*[19]

Abolitionist Frances Watkins Harper, who also believed that God championed equality for all humankind, dedicated her life to the anti-slavery movement because she felt a divine commission to do so. Harper was driven by her personal God-revelation and her understanding of "her call."

> *'"It may be that God himself has written upon both my heart and my brain a commission to use time talent and energy in the cause of freedom..."'*[20]

Hearing God for herself drove many a woman of color from her traditional posture of inactivity and hostile acquiescence, and propelled her to an active rebellion that required her to devote herself to the cause of freedom.

Just as the Black woman has been able to reject the White, oppressive interpretation of scripture, her ideology and hermeneutic also dictated that she reject the obvious patriarchal interpretation of certain scriptures. A provocative critique of the traditional interpretation of the "fall of man" comes from an insightful slave woman by the name of Mariah Barnes.

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[19]This quote is cited in We Are Your Sisters: Black Women of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Dorothy Sterling (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1984), 397.

[20]This quote is cited by Benjamin E. Mays in The Negro's God (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 119.

> *"....Me and de old man set here and talks about de Bible and old times and what's gwine to 'come of us when de other one leave here. Berle can read de Bible, but I wa'n't never learnt to read and write. Who was to blame for eatin' de apple dat time, old man? I forgits from one time to de next. How come Adam to blame? Cause de law was laid down to him, not to de woman; I 'members dat."*[21]

Even though Mariah was illiterate, her reading of the text obviously grew out of her perception of truth. The wisdom of her "hermeneutic of suspicion" reveals an insight and profundity that certainly elevates her to the status of "theologian."[22]

Still more upsetting to some religious communities and to their patriarchal biblical interpretation, was the female's "intrusion" into an all-male ministry. So far-fetched was the notion of a woman-preacher, that when a ex-slave woman called "Old Elizabeth" traveled from one "religious professor to another" hoping to get some affirmation of her "call," the men would not even entertain the possibility of her preaching. Knowing, however, that she had been given a message from God and feeling that she could no longer refrain from sharing that message, Elizabeth

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[21]George C. L. Cummings, "The Slave Narratives as a Source of Black Theological Discourse: The Spirit and Eschatology," in Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 89.

[22]"Hermeneutic of suspicion" is a term popularized by Paul Ricoeur. The term suggests that the practices of biblical interpretation are shaped by distrust or a disbelief of the apparent claims of the texts and of the subsequent interpretations of the bibical texts by later interpreters.

finally had to move out without male approval, understanding that it was more important to obey the Lord's admonition.

> *".... it was revealed to me that the message which had been given to me I had not yet delivered, and the time had come....I was moved to open a Bible that was near me....my eyes fell upon this passage, 'Gird up thy loins now like a man, and answer thou me. Obey God rather than man,'.... I went from one religious professor to another, inquiring of them what ailed me; but of all these I could find none who could throw any light upon such impressions. They all told me there was nothing in scripture that would sanction such exercises... and the Lord showed me that it was his will I should be resigned to die any death that might be my lot, and carrying his message....*[23]

Convinced that she was a mouth-piece for the Lord, Elizabeth served as an itinerant evangelist who preached "God-given" messages all across the eastern states. "Faith supplied her with the fortitude to minister without ordination to the wants of others, and her belief gave her the courage to preach fearlessly against slavery."[24] *Her social gospel and critiques of the existing culture were so controversial that she recurrently faced the hostility of the male "powers-that-be," both secular and ecclesiastical, and was, on occasion, threatened with imprisonment.*

> *At a meeting which I held in Maryland, I was led to speak from the passage, 'Woe to the rebellious city," After the meeting, the people came where I was to take me before the squire; but the Lord delivered me*

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[23]"Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman", in Six Women's Slave Narratives, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 9-10.

[24]Loewenberg and Bogin, Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life, 127.

> *from their hands...I also held meetings in Virginia. The people there would not believe that a colored woman could preach. And moreover, as she had no learning, they strove to imprison me because I spoke against slavery: and being brought up, they asked by what authority I spake? and if I had been ordained? I answered, not be the commission of men's hands: if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better.*[25]

Elizabeth's fearless pride and dauntless faith so empowered her with the courage to preach against sin that she would not be intimidated by either the White religious authorities or White secular authorities. Elizabeth was never put in prison, and her sense of divine mission so motivated her that she faced opposition without compromise.

The men of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church had to contend with a confident and spirit-filled woman by the name of Julia Foote, whose demand for an egalitarian ministry caused considerable conflict within their patriarchal community. Often accused of being indecorous and too aggressive, this grass-roots theologian, who admittedly had at one time spoken against women preaching, refused to conform to the ecclesiastical mores of her day and condemned the misogynist theology of her denomination. Comparing their religious sexism to the political racism from which they sought deliverance, Foote called the brethren of the clergy to authentic and open-minded biblical interpretation.

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[25]Ibid., 17.

> *'But the Bible puts an end to this strife when it says: "There is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus" [Gal. 3:28). Philip had four daughters that prophesied or preached. Paul called Priscilla, as well as Aquila, his "helper," or, as in the Greek, his fellow-laborer"..... The same word, which, in our common translation, is now rendered a "servant of the church," in speaking of Phoebe (Rom.xix. 1.), is rendered "minister" when applied to Tychicus,Eph. vi. 21. When Paul said, "Help those women who labor with me in the Gospel," he certainly meant they did more than pour out tea....'*[26]

Additionally, Foote's words of admonition to her "Christian sisters" provide a spiritual wisdom and insight that continue to resound in the "sanctified consciousness" of all "called and chosen" females.

> *"Sisters, shall not you and I unite with the heavenly chorus? If so, you will not let what man may say or do, keep you from doing the will of the Lord or using the gifts you have for the good of others. How much easier to bear the reproach of men than to live at a distance from God. Be not kept in bondage by those who say, "We suffer not a woman to teach," thus quoting Paul's words [I Cor. 14:34], but not rightly applying them."*[27]

Jarena Lee--A Trailblazer for Egalitarian Ministry

One of the most well-known nineteenth-century Black women who would not conform to the Black church's misogynist ideals was Jarena Lee. Converted as a young woman, and after several years of questioning the authenticity of her

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[26]Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote, "A Brand Plucked From the Fire," in Sisters of the Spirit, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 36.

[27]Ibid., 227.

conversion experience, Lee finally came to regard herself as one who had, through the power of the spirit, been endowed with special powers and gifts from heaven. Like the typical Black female, Jarena Lee had been brought up to identify with the traditional roles prescribed by social and ecclesiastical structures, but when she received the call to preach, a new sense of divinely endowed selfhood empowered her to respond to that call. Upon hearing from the Rev. Richard Allen that the A.M.E. Church discipline did not call for women preachers, even without access to the historical/social analysis of the Biblical text that would reject that thesis, Lee opposed a male-centered interpretation that excluded women from the Christian ministry. Defiantly asking the right questions, she responded to her questions by offering her own answers and interpretations. This is demonstrated in her rebuttal to the A.M.E. Church's sexist biblical interpretation as it was expressed in their tradition and their discipline.

> *"And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for women to preach? seeing that the Savior died for the woman as well as the man.*
>
> *If the man may preach because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Savior, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach would make it appear.*[28]

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[28]Jarena Lee, "The Life and the Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee," in Sisters of the Spirit, 36.

Lee's commitment to the non-sexist reality of God and to her faithfulness to her "divine assignment" transcended the tradition of the A.M.E. church and widespread male-dominated interpretation. Though she was never ordained, her tenacity, steadfastness and greatness as a preacher persistently confronted her male colleagues' sexism, and in spite of the fact that they excluded her from their ranks, they could not deter her from forging her own paths in the A.M.E. Church. Refusing to accept the office of "exhorter," because it would have made her "dependent on the male leadership of the church for access to the ears of a congregation and to the Bible itself, insofar as it could be used to authorize public speaking in church,"[29] *Lee rejected a second-class ministry to pursue the independent ministry into which God had ordained her. Her disobedience to church polity did not reflect a disrespect for authority, but rather a commitment to divine authority so strong that she could not desist or waver, even in the presence of "non-acceptance."*

Originally, Lee did not defy the restrictive patriarchal community of the church. After Richard Allen declined her petition to preach, she repressed her spiritual ambition and abandoned her pursuit of an "alternative" lifestyle. She resolved to conform to the traditional role

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[29]Andrews, "Introduction," Sisters of the Spirit, 14.

of a nineteenth century Black woman by marrying Joseph Lee, a pastor of a "society" located near Philadelphia, and sublimating her call to preach as she attempted to function as a "good wife." So emotionally and mentally devastating were the termination of her attempts to preach and the restrictions of marriage that Jarena could not cope with this estrangement from her sacred call and she had what appeared to be a nervous breakdown. It was only after God gave her a personal assurance that her ministry would not be forever hindered, that Lee could regain her "health" and wait for restoration to her "rightful place." It was that promise and the "frequent baptisms of the Spirit" that gave her the stamina to withstand her situation.

When Joseph Lee died in the seventh year of their marriage, Jarena, who now had two children, was left in a state of desolation and utter dependence on God. The Bible provided her with a great deal of hope and comfort as she read that God is the God of the widow, and a father to the fatherless. [Ps. 68:5][30]

After her husband's death, Jarena was able to resume the pursuit of her ministry. After hearing her preach extemporaneously in a service, Richard Allen approved her request to preach, and Jarena was able to pursue her ministry fully. Lee's desire for an official role for

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[30]Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee," in Sisters of the Spirit, 41.

herself in the structure of the Church met with intense opposition from its male leaders, but because they recognized her anointing to "preach" and lead souls to Christ, the desire for church-expansion prompted many male ministers to allow her to exhort and hold prayer meetings on behalf of the A.M.E. Church. They would not ordain her, or even give her a license to preach, but they would permit her to evangelize on behalf of the denomination so that their numbers might increase. (This point highlights the general willingness of Black churchmen to "use" and benefit from the gifts and abilities of Black women to enhance the growth and development of their churches and denominations, while they safeguard the positions of leadership within those entities and reserve them for males only.)

Undaunted by hindrances, Lee's ministry soon took precedence over friends and family. So intense was her desire to do the Lord's will that she forsook her traditional role as primary caretaker of her children and even when she had to leave a sick child behind, she would travel to preach wherever she got the opportunity.

> *"....I had a call to preach at a place about thirty miles distant, among the Methodists, with whom I remained one week, and during the whole time not one thought of my little son came into my mind; it was hid from me, lest I should have been diverted from the work I had to, to look after my son."*[31]

Conclusively, Lee did not identify herself as a mother

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[31]Ibid., 45.

first and foremost. She was a God-called "professional" who was equally committed to her preaching career. Ultimately, she broke up housekeeping, took her children to her mother and, "forsaking all," she set about to preach the Gospel on a full-time basis. The scope of her itinerary spanned thousands of miles, as she consistently worked to break the chains of spiritual and mental enslavement through the preaching of the Word of God. Jarena Lee lived her life according to her understanding of God's purpose for her life and much of that understanding came from her knowledge of the biblical text. Her willingness to break the social bonds which imprisoned her, and her ultimate "spiritual liberation" grew out of her radical biblical interpretation and her experience with an egalitarian Holy Spirit.

> *"So it may be with such as I am.... wishing to know much of the way and the law of God, have therefore watched the more closely the operations of the Spirit, and have in consequence been led thereby. But let it be remarked that I have never found that Spirit to lead me contrary to the Scriptures of truth, as I understand them. 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are the sons (and daughters) of God'-- Rom. viii 14."*[32]

From the beginning, then, the Black Church has not only been silent about the larger community's oppression of its women, but it has perpetuated Black female oppression and suffering. This fact can be documented as we explore the experiences of nineteenth century women like Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and numerous other women preachers

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[32]Ibid., 48.

who suffered under the realities of a radical sexism which was manifested in the predominately Black congregations and denominations.[33]

The Black Church was largely born out of criticism of and resistance to the discriminatory treatment of Black men and women from White churches, but once the Black Church was established and operative in the lives of Blacks, the men seized and guarded their new-found power with such intensity and tenacity that women were immediately blocked from formal leadership positions and were treated as inferiors. In the A.M.E. Church, which was the first predominately Black denomination founded in the United States, positions of bishop, elder, deacon, pastor, steward and trustee were kept from women. Officially organized in 1816, it was not until almost one hundred years later that the structure of the church provided any positions for women. The establishment of those positions --stewardess and deaconess--were offered as an appeasement to those women who questioned the lack of female visibility in leadership roles in the church.

Jualynne Dodson credits the activities of Lee and other nineteenth "preaching women" as the "cutting edge which pierced the fabric of the Church's male authority structure." Discussions about gender justice confronted the

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[33]The autobiographies of Lee, Elaw, and Foote are found in Sisters of the Spirit.

evil structures and misogamy of the male-led Black Church. She states:

> *"The women were not revolutionaries bent on shaking structures, but reformers wishing a more inclusive and just organization. They were devoutly religious and felt supremely ordained to carry out their call to preach the gospel of Christianity."*[34]

The Womanist Thinking Sojourner Truth

As the feminist movement in America emerged, the 19th century Black woman certainly felt drawn to the movement based on her experience with sexism both inside and outside her community. Nevertheless, from the beginning, it was apparent to Black women that the feminist movement, in general, and feminist theology, in particular, did not adequately reflect and address their experiences and cultural realities in an America whose foundational structures are not only sexist, but are equally racist and classist. Though there may have been half-hearted efforts on the part of many White feminist theologians to "include" their sisters of color in the feminist movement, it is evident that White women's rights advocates never really launched a campaign that would advocate social equality for

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[34]Jualynne Dodson, "Nineteenth Century A.M.E. Preaching Women: The Cutting Edge of Women's Inclusion in Church Polity," in Women in New Worlds, eds. H. F. Thomas and R. S. Keller (1981), 277-278.

women of color. Even with a degree of dialogue and exchange between White and Black women, the African American female experience and history was allowed little ground toward informing the development and methodology of feminist theology. The feminist movement, both inside and outside the Church, in expounding its issues, objections and alternatives to sexism, was insensitive to the plight of Black women in its articulation. This truth rings out in Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I A Woman?" speech at the Women's Rights Convention in the nineteenth century.

> *"That man over there say that women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever help me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best places,....and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!.... I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me--and ain't I a woman?....I have borne five children and I seen them most all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief none but Jesus heard--and ain't I a woman."*[35]

None but Jesus heard (and understood) the cry of the Black woman, and certainly not White women, for indeed, they had participated in Black-women's oppression and suffering. Although their kindred femaleness should have made White women instinctively sensitive to Black women's plight, the slave/slaveholder or mistress/servant reality was a human dynamic that the common fight against sexism could not

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[35]This speech by Sojourner Truth is printed in Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life, Loewenberg and Bogin, eds., 235.

dismiss. Even the most "sensitive" and "conscientious" White women could not be trustworthy allies because there was always the potential for discrimination.

Sojourner Truth might have been a true feminist in spirit and theory, and she did share in the concerns of White women in America, but her experiences as an oppressed, hard-working, and unpampered slave woman and domestic servant dictated that her cry for liberation, equality and respect be innately different in scope and content from the cries of White women. Truth had been subjected to heavy labor, been beaten by cruel masters and had her children ripped away from her breast, not because she was a woman, but because she was Black. Likewise, the story is told of her encounter with some proslavery auditors who challenged her to "bare her chest" to prove that she was a woman. The confusion of her gender, of course, was grounded in the fact that this tall, big-framed, and deep-voiced woman did not "look" or "sound" like a woman.

> *"At the close of the meeting, Dr. T.W. Strain, the mouthpiece of the slave Democracy, requested the large congregation to 'hold,' and stated that a doubt existed in the minds of many persons present respecting the sex of the speaker, and it was his impression that a majority of them believed the speaker to be a man. The doctor demanded that Sojourner submit her breast to the inspection of some of the ladies present...."*[36]

Surely, had she been a White woman, there would have been no need for such a degrading request. Thus, the White woman's

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[36]Dorothy Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, 151.

fight against the evils of sexism, especially as manifested in the inability of women to vote, was real to Sojourner, but her enemy was not only sexism, but also the racism and classism that made her experience in America so very disparate from that of her female oppressor. Since racism and classism are not solely female issues, but are concerns of the entire Black community, Sojourner's consciousness and activities far transcended those of feminist liberation. Her goal was to eliminate all of the suffering that resulted from the evils of Church and society.

With a determination to serve her God and her people, this "drum majorette for justice" embarked on a fight for the abolition of slavery that jolted this country to its racist core. Extraordinarily gifted with a deep and powerful voice, this electrifying orator would hold audiences spellbound as she expounded on the evils of slavery. Even though this most remarkable nineteenth century liberationist is identified as a "feminist," in actuality she was a first generation "Womanist," whose concerns were those of "survival and community building and maintenance. The goal of this community building was, of course, to establish a positive quality of life-- economic, spiritual, educational--for Black women, men and children"[37] *by defeating the evil manifestations of racism, classism, and sexism.*

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[37]Loewenberg and Bogin, 182.

Truth's "womanist/feminist" consciousness was rooted in her religious ideals, her knowledge of God and scripture, and communion with the Spirit. Fully persuaded that she was God's instrument of liberation, she believed that "the freedom movement was the secular counterpart of spiritual salvation."[38]

> *"The Lord has made me a sign unto this nation, an' so I go round a'testifyin', an' showing their sins agin my people. My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin'to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an' down the land....Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people."*[39]

Religious faith kept Sojourner in touch with a reality that provided her with the means by which she could view the world and its immorality. Although she could not read or write, her illiteracy was transcended by her knowledge of the "divine". Her innate theology was rooted in her personal God-experience, and even when the oppressor was her Black brother, her "egalitarian hermeneutic" challenged his sexist and oppressive beliefs.

Then that little man in black there, he says

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[38]Lowenberg and Bogin, 235.

[39]This quote by Sojourner Truth was recorded by Harriet Beecher Stowe. It is printed in We Are Your Sisters--Black Women in the Nineteen Century, ed. Dorothy Sterling (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 151.

> *women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him....*[40]

Conclusion

Indeed, some Eurocentric scholars would ask how eighteenth and nineteenth century Black women would dare to understand and interpret various texts without the "proper hermeneutical tools" and in the absence of any knowledge of the historical/social/ textual analysis that would provide them with the "accurate understanding" to a given text. On what basis did they formulate a hermeneutic which rejected the image of the pro-slavery and anti-woman God to which tradition and doctrine have introduced them? On what grounds have they eliminated or "re-interpreted" certain scriptures in their engagement of the text? The African American woman's interpretation of text was a product of her determination to affirm her personhood and to survive. Her emotional, psychological and religious well-being has been directly related to her ability to hear the Bible with her own ear, and her need to be delivered from her suffering. Renita Weems suggests:

> *When we consider more specifically the matter of the Bible's status as an authoritative text, again the histories of both African Americans and women in this country show rather clearly that it is not texts per se that function authoritatively. Rather, it is reading strategies, and more precisely,* ***particular***

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[40]This speech by Sojourner Truth is cited in Lowenberg and Bogin, 236.

> *readings that turn out, in fact, to be authoritative..... In other words, readers and reading strategies have far more power than isolated ancient text in themselves.*[41]

The ability to read the texts selectively, symbolically, metaphorically and creatively has been the experience of Black women. "In short, the Bible became the world into which African American (women) could retreat, a world they could identify with, draw strength from, and in fact manipulate for self-affirmation.[42]

In spite of the fact that both Eurocentric and Afrocentric scholarship have demonstrated that certain portions of scripture are unforgivably oppressive and inimical as it relates to their Black and female personhood, African American Christian women have, in general, embraced and valued the Bible as a vital and unquestionable part of their religious experience. Because it is no secret that historically certain scriptures were used to control and subjugate Blacks and women, scholars and theologians are consistently confounded by the fact that the Holy Book is still highly regarded and frequently consulted by Black females, scholars and non-scholars alike, in the African

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[41]Renita J. Weems, "African American Women and the Bible: Reading Her Way Through The Struggle," in Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 64-65.

[42]Vincent Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," in Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 58.

American Church community. While Black women scholars might dialogue and challenge scripture on several levels, the "average" female in the Black Church tradition, on the other hand, has been almost unswerving in her ability to commune and identify with the ideals and the characters contained in the text. One solution to the problem has been to suggest that it is an unfortunate lack of sophistication and an overall nescience that have formulated and shaped the African American female's commitment to scripture. This theory is not only unacceptable, it exemplifies a tremendous insensitivity to and lack of awareness of the Black female experience. It also denies the wisdom of the womanist hermeneutic that evolved during slavery and the healing that resulted from that hermeneutic. It then becomes the task of womanist theology to confront and challenge scholars and critics to understand that there is "something at work here that involves more than the (African American female) reader's lack of sophistication, or a slavish dogmatic devotion to the Bible."[43]

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[43]Renita Weems, "African American Women and the Bible," 58.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND EXEGETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PREACHING HEALING TO HURTING WOMEN

Traditional biblical interpretation has historically been done from the perspective of Eurocentric culture. The beliefs, values, and concerns of those in power have been the basis of biblical interpretation since the beginning of the early church. In their book, Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed, Justo L. and Catherine G. Gonzalez argue that since the time of the early Church, Christians have unconsciously adapted Christian teachings to the views and interests of those in positions of power. Even though most first century Christians were poor and uneducated, out of their commitment to Christian evangelism and a desire to win the approval of those who dominated society, there was a concerted effort to accommodate Christianity to Greek Philosophy and Roman Law.

> But what eventually took place was that Christians themselves began to think that Greek philosophy and Roman law spoke a clearer word about God and the divine purposes than did the bible itself. By the time Constantine came to power, in the early fourth century, and he and his successors embraced Christianity, it was possible to do so without rejecting many of the values of the "best" Graeco-Roman society.... (Even) the rituals of the

> *Christian worship began to imitate the formalities of the imperial court....* [1]

Biblical hermeneutics and religious customs began to reflect the attitude of that segment of society which was exploitive and oppressive. Biblical interpretation was conformed to justify and support the practices, lifestyles, and the economic interests of those in power, and shaped to safeguard classism and human exploitation. This devotion to adapting the Bible to the mores of the dominant society was ironic and paradoxical, at best, when one remembers that Jesus constantly confronted political and ideological systems that promulgated and sanctioned the oppression, exploitation and marginalization of any human beings.

As the Church accommodated its teachings to the patriarchal philosophies and experiences of the dominate culture, resistance emerged among the ranks. Monasticism evolved among those who could not agree with the "contaminated" theologies of the Church. Refusing to compromise the gospel, many male and female monastics retreated from the life of the Church and dwelt in isolation. "Others, while embracing the monastic attitude toward the prevailing values of society, continued their active involvement in the life of the church and often

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[1]Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 13.

collided with the powerful."[2] *They believed that if the Church is to be congruous with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it would have to reject the "status quo" and embrace biblical principles that would provide political, social, and spiritual liberation for the oppressed. The theological goal was to change the hermeneutics of Christianity from the perspective of the powerful to the perspective of the powerless.*

It is out of this same context that liberation theologies emerged.[3] *Declaring that the methodologies used by the powerful to interpret the biblical text were unacceptable, the ideological goals of all liberation theologies were to do theology from the perspective of the underside. In fact, it is the claim of most liberation theologians that the gospel message is written for the marginalized, and is best understood by those who have suffered under the oppressive restraints of the powerful. Biblical interpretation, therefore, must remain true to the understanding that the Bible is a God-given tool of*

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[2]Ibid., 14.

[3] Gonzalez and Gonzalez define the term "liberation theology" as theology done from the perspective of those who have been traditionally powerless in society and voiceless in the church. In the United States, this means Blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans and others. In Latin America, Asia, and Africa, it means those who have long been the subjects of colonialism, economic and political as well as ecclesiastical oppression. In societies which worship youth, it means the aged. **All over the world, it means women.** (p.11-12)

liberation for the marginalized and oppressed.

Liberation theologians argue that the Bible is not politically or ideologically neutral. Its function is to confront and abolish every androcentric and patriarchal structure that oppresses any segment of humanity. Likewise, liberation theologies are not neutral; they are biased, specific, and experiential. They come out of diverse groups and situations, and reflect the concreteness of the struggle in which they are involved.[4] *It becomes the task of the 20th century liberation theologian to develop reading strategies that appropriate the liberating perspectives of the Bible on behalf of their specific marginalized group.*

Preaching Liberation To African-American Women

As liberation theologies have emerged to confront all forms and levels of marginalization operative in the realities of individual ethnic, socio-economic and gender groups, Womanist theology has become the twentieth century voice of and for African American women both in the academy and the Church. A comprehensive acquisition of power for the powerless and oppressed, however, requires a systematic and ongoing spiritual and intellectual collaboration between

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[4]Ibid., 19.

African American women in the academy and those in the Church. Emancipation from the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional bondage that has resulted from Black women's experience in this country requires a merging of "the new modes of critical inquiry by African-American women in the theological academy and the central role that preaching plays as a cultural phenomenon in the Black church community.[5] *For the most part, the academicians and Black preachers have rarely engaged one another in dialogue, but the time has come for these two areas of interpretive methodology to come together. Black preachers, especially females, must use womanist interpretive methodologies and womanist theologians must employ homiletical methodologies.*

Womanist scholarship must give attention to an interpretive course that will give new vision to the Black preacher and empower the African-American church community. Henry Mitchell reports that, fortunately, Black preachers have already begun to employ some creative use of scholarship.

> *Black preachers often use the best of biblical scholarship to add living details that would not otherwise be evident to the laity. These fresh insights are used to enhance the gripping realism of a message. It must never be assumed that such scholarly insights are sought and used by those who are formerly trained. Some of the most crea-*

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[5]Katie G. Cannon, "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church," in Searching the Scripture--Volume One: A Feminist Introduction, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (with the assistance of Shelley Matthews), (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 326.

> *tive uses of details from archaeological and anthropological research are made by preachers with no degrees, but with great gifts from God, and such dedication to the task of preaching that they spend most of their time reading, meditating and preparing to preach.*[6]

It is likely that most of the scholarly insights are characterized by androcentricity, so the challenge now is to move African-American preachers to a womanist analysis of scripture that demands a reconstruction that is liberating to women as well as men, and reflects the totality of the Black experience. The exegetical and redactional approaches to sermon development should take departure from traditional androcentric interests and perspectives, and embrace a Womanist analysis.[7] *Samuel D. Proctor asserts that*

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[6]Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 61.

[7] Four interpretive strategies are proposed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her book, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 52-76. These strategies, while offered as a critical approach to feminist interpretation of scripture, are appropriate for womanist thinkers.
1. *A Hermeneutics of suspicion* explores the liberation or oppressive values and visions inscribed in the text by identifying the androcentric-patriarchal character and dynamics of the text and its interpretations. It rests on the insight that all biblical texts are articulated in grammatically masculine language--a language which is embedded in a patriarchal culture, religion, and society, and which is canonized, interpreted, and proclaimed by a long line of men.
2. *A hermeneutics of remembrance* moves against the grain of the androcentric text to the life and struggles of women in the early churches. It seeks to reconstruct early Christian history as the history of men and women, as it uncovers both the values inscribed in the text and the patriarchal or emancipatory interest of its historical contextualization.

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3. *A hermeneutics of evaluation and proclamation* must critically assess the values and visions the text promulgates in order to help women to name the alienation from and oppression within biblical religions. Texts which reinscribe patriarchal relations of domination and exploitation must not be proclaimed as the word of God, but as the words of men.
4. *A hermeneutics of imagination* seeks to actualize and dramatize biblical texts differently....It retells biblical stories from a different perspective and amplifies the emancipatory voices suppressed in biblical texts while articulating alternative liberating interpretation that do not build on the androcentric dualism and patriarchal functions of the text.

Schüssler-Fiorenza suggests that these strategies, while theoretically distinguishing, "interact with each other in the process of interpretation." Finally, while womanist thinkers might utilize these four reading strategies, we must not be limited to just these. Womanist interpretations of scripture require that new strategies emerge as we continue to confront and critique the biblical text. For example, I will discuss later in this paper Cheryl Gilkes' proposal that Black biblical interpretation be informed by a "hermeneutic of affirmation."

preaching should be responsive to "crisis in the community"[8] and Henry H. Mitchell argues that the preacher is responsible for preaching to the "whole person."[9] Moreover, Katie Cannon charges that Black preachers should "be sensitive to the emotional, political, physical, and intellectual implications " of the gospel message.[10] Our language, images and metaphors, Renita Weems instructs us, should "do justice to the richness of the human

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[8]Samuel D. Proctor, Preaching About Crises in the Community (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988).

[9]Henry H. Mitchell, Celebration and Experience in Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). See chapter entitled "On Preaching to the Whole Person," 17-35.

[10]Katie G. Cannon, "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church," 334.

experience."[11] These directives remind us that preaching to twentieth century women must be relevant, candid, and totally experiential. This means that she or he who preaches must acknowledge sexism and racism as realities in the lives of African American women, and then move on to explore their most violent and demeaning dimensions. Racism has been defined as the systematic marginalization, oppression and domination of persons on the basis of race; sexism has been defined as "the systematic denial, exploitation, and oppression of women."[12] While these definitions speak adequately to the various dimensions of African-American oppression, there has been a tendency on the part of the Black preacher, male and female, to explore these evils only in part.

Homiletical and hermeneutical scrutinization have neglected to give a comprehensive analysis of each dimension of racism and sexism and have ignored the manifestations and the ramifications of some very real and destructive forms of violence in the lives of the oppressed who are Black and female. African-American women live daily with ubiquitous

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[11]Renita J. Weems, "Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?" Semeia 47 , eds. Katie Geneva Cannon and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, (Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), 101.

[12]Christine M. Smith, Preaching As Weeping, Confession, and Resistance:Radical Responses to Radical Evil (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992). See her chapters entitled "Breaking Silence Exposes Misogyny--SEXISM," 62-86 and "Conversion Uproots Supremacy--White Racism," 110-134.

forms of violence that are perpetrated in acts of rape, spousal abuse, incest, and female battering. The majority of African-American preachers have been unforgivably silent about these expressions of violence, trying to restrict the parameters of racism and sexism to discussions of economic exploitation, equal opportunity employment, political injustices, stereotyping and social hierarchy (race, class and gender). Even worse, the pulpits across the country have been largely occupied with those who have denied the existence of misogyny and the patriarchal underpinnings of social and domestic violence, as they have traditionally degraded women by espousing a "blame-the-victim" theology. Heaped onto the pain and woundedness of female victims of male violence is guilt and humiliation. Homiletic integrity demands, however, that preaching move into the hurting places of the female community by naming the sins of their male perpetrators, dismantling all anti-female assumptions, alleviating guilt, blame and shame, and ministering healing to their wounded hearts, minds and spirits.[13]

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[13]See Andrew Sung Park's, The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 15-30.

This author challenges the Christian Church to address the suffering and pain of the victims of sin as conscientiously as it deals with the redemption of sinners. Park defines "han" as frustrated hope...the hardened heart that is grieved by oppression and injustice.. hopelessness. Han is further defined as "the collapsed pain of the heart due to psychosomatic, interpersonal, social, political, economic, and cultural oppression and repression. The reality of han is the emotional, rational, and physical suffering of pain rooted in the anguish of a victim."

The Implications of a Contemporary Womanist Interpretation of Scripture

Stephen Breck Reid states that "Black biblical interpretation begins with Black experience" and that a Black biblical hermeneutic must interpret the Black experience and the biblical text as well.[14] *He believes that a Black biblical hermeneutic evolves not only as we use scripture to establish and study our identity, but also that Black biblical interpretation re-discovers the historical/ cultural/religious traditions of the text so that community can find itself therein. Womanist biblical and exegetical concerns and strategies yield six insights for the construction of a womanist homiletical method.*

First, a womanist homiletical method is informed by a "hermeneutic of affirmation."[15] *In her article "Mother to the Motherless," sociologist Cheryl Gilkes confirms Breck's analysis when she asserts that "an Afrocentric reading of the Bible is a reading that incorporates the events that are central to the Black experience and affirms the dignity of the African personality in the face of the forces of*

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[14]Stephen Breck Reid, Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 12, 18-19.

[15]"A hermeneutic of affirmation" is used by Cheryl Gilkes (p.63). It refers to an Afrocentric reading of the Bible that incorporates the events that are central to the Black experience and affirms the dignity of the African personality in the face of the forces of degradation.

degradation...."[16] *By acknowledging that the Bible gives all humanity a vision of salvation that includes spiritual, economic and political empowerment, the Black community is re-assured of its divine entitlement to justice and an "oppression-free" existence.*

Inherent in contemporary womanist consciousness is a prophetic tradition of biblical interpretation that sanctions and affirms Black women's experiences, past and present. By using their own interpretive principle, womanist theologians and preachers engage in an investigation and critique of the Bible that remembers their history as it creates new and variegated realities which will provide the divine healing, inclusion and empowerment that they and their community need. These new realities can only be accomplished with the destruction of those traditional and oppressive interpretations of the biblical text that have been birthed in "demonarchy." Katie Cannon argues:

> *A womanist critique of homiletics challenges conventional biblical interpretations that characterize African-American women as "sin-bringing Eve," "wilderness-whimpering Hagar," " henpecking Jezebel," "whoring Gomer," "prostituting Mary-Magdalene," and "conspiring Sapphira." A womanist hermeneutic identifies the frame of sexist-racist social contradictions housed in sacred rhetoric that gives women a low image of ourselves. This analysis deconstructs biblically based sermons that portray female subjects as bleeding,*

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[16] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless': Power, Gender, and Community in an Afrocentric Biblical Tradition," Semeia 47, Society of Biblical Literature (1989): 63.

> *crippled, disempowered, objectified, purified madwomen.*[17]

Secondly, as womanist preachers and theologians assume the task of biblical interpretation and preaching, it is critical and imperative that they both implement an interpretive process that is liberating and affirming, and develop a methodology and hermeneutic that is situated in "Black female sensitivity" and contextual reality. Because Eurocentric biblical analysis has traditionally oppressed marginalized people who are female and of African descent, it becomes the task of womanist preachers to engage in an interpretation of scripture that rejects any racist or misogynist biblical analyses, and to seek to implement a "hermeneutic of healing" that authenticates the humanity of African American women, and speaks to their condition and experiences, past and present. James H. Evans, Jr., supports this theory:

> *"Therefore, the preacher cannot be content simply to tell the people what the text says. She or he must embody the voice of God, enflesh the Word of the Lord, provide from her or his own depth of being the personal motivations and innermost thoughts of the biblical characters that the biblical writers providentially left unexpressed. The preacher must be able to show or make a place in the biblical world for those who have historically been outsiders."*[18]

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[17]Katie G. Cannon, "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church," 326-327.

[18]James H. Evans, Jr., We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 50.

We must commit ourselves to becoming the embodiment of Isaiah's mission statement:

> *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prisons to those who are bound...to comfort all who mourn...to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.... (Isaiah 61:1-3)*

A third methodological component requires that a womanist preacher's hermeneutic provide existential insight into the dilemmas that grip African American women's existence, as it also reflects and advocates a way of life to which African American female readers genuinely aspire.[19] *Womanist scholars reject feminist methodologies which de-value the text that their great-grandmothers loved, and through their critical analysis of the scripture, they apply an egalitarian reading and interpretation of the text. Womanist theologians must use their talents, their resources and their insights to appropriate the liberating and self-affirming aspects of the text. Sound exegetical treatments can legitimately yield a liberation/ womanist hermeneutic to the reading of scripture that validates African American women's experience and uncovers the infinite liberating aspects of the biblical text. These uncoverings involve not only commentaries and books as resources, but also the*

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[19]Weems, 63.

poetry and music of her church and her community.[20]

Another element of the womanist homiletical approach demonstrates that womanist theology provides the theological and hermeneutical ground that insists that Black women can "contextualize" the Bible and see it as a paradigm of liberation. Developing reading strategies that ascribe a liberationist hermeneutic to the Bible means that Black women determine that it is in the best interest of African-American women to identify interpretative principles that exercises a "measure of hermeneutical control over the Bible."[21] *As readers of the text, womanist theologians provide a historical/cultural critical study of the biblical text that demonstrates that African American Christian Women's experience can be legitimately affirmed in the biblical text. Such a critique will also substantiate their understanding that "portions of the Bible describe a world where the oppressed are liberated, the last become first, the humble are exalted, the despised are preferred, the rejected are welcomed, the long suffering are rewarded, the dispossessed are repossessed, and the arrogant are*

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[20]Reid, 21.

[21]Vincent Wimbush suggests that it will be "impossible of Afro-Christian churches to articulate self-understanding, maintain integrity as separate communities, and determine their mission in the world," unless they exercise a degree of "hermeneutical control over the Bible." Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation," Semeia 49 , 1989: 47-48.

prostrated."[22] Thus, in the midst of traditional critical analysis, and often in spite of the voice of the dominate culture, Black women's biblical hermeneutic will still be heard.

A womanist hermeneutic is critical for the continuation and formation of a process of the Black woman's self-identification among the female characters in the Bible. The goal is to intensify the voices of women in biblical narrative.[23] Womanist scholar Clarice Martin offers a fifth methodology when she asserts that "for the womanist biblical interpreter, fervid, if painstaking, searches for women's voices must proceed not only with reference to women in biblical narratives, but also with a concomitant concern for all of those who by virtue of race, class, or other anthropological referents, have been historically marginalized by the biblical traditions and/or writers themselves, and by interpreters of those traditions."[24] To be able to find solidarity with the marginalized of the biblical text, the Black experience, in general, and the Black woman's experience, in particular, must be interpreted

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[22]Weems, 70-71.

[23]See Renita Weems' Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).

[24]Clarice Martin, "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, vol. 6, no.2, (Fall, 1990): 51.

and affirmed through those biblical witnesses. Black women must be able to see their experience through the reading of the text, and their experience must shape their reading of the text.

This process, which is invaluable in preaching and teaching settings in the Black Church, is made easy, initially, because historical analysis has revealed the presence of several women of African descent in scripture. The task of womanist theologians, however, is not only to expose and emphasize the historical heritage of these women, but to confront those who would deny that heritage.

In her book, An Introduction to the Old Testament--A Feminist Perspective, Alice L. Laffey shows her insensitivity to Black women's experience and search for historical truth. In her portrayal of the women who are traditionally considered "women of color," not only is their African heritage minimized, their struggles arising from that heritage are denied and their ultimate victories ignored. Hagar and Zipporah are described as mere "foreigners," and the social implications of that "foreign" status are buried in her feminist rhetoric. To reduce the conflict between Hagar and Sarah to that of a wife and concubine [25] is to deny the racist implications inherent in that narrative and its traditional interpretations. For

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[25]Alice L. Laffey, An Introduction To The Old Testament--A Feminist Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 33-38.

African American female readers, Hagar is not a mere concubine; she is a woman of color who represents and dialogues with all of the marginalized women who are her descendants. Her ultimate victory and survival in the desert speaks to the possibility of African American women even in the midst of a hopeless situation. Additionally, a womanist hermeneutic can also find redemption in the God who seemingly sided with Sarah when that God commanded Abraham to cast Hagar out of his home. Black women should see that expulsion from their household as inconsequential in the light of her liberation from the oppressive Sarah and the apathetic Abraham, and her ultimate restoration to safety and security.

Likewise, Laffey's presentation of a feminist interpretation of the story of Zipporah neglects and gives no credence to Miriam and Aaron's hatred of Zipporah because she is a Cushite woman.[26] *She offers no insight into the character's probable feelings of rejection, nor does she explore the social implications regarding the issue of her Blackness. Feminist readings like these are inadequate for Black women, and demand that a responsible womanist interpretation release these female characters of African ancestry from the bondage of White interpretations.*

A sixth technique for constructing a womanist hermeneutic is an appropriation of biblical women who have

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[26]Laffey, 48-51.

not traditionally been thought of as women of color. Feminists like Schüssler-Fiorenza and D'Angelo, have accused biblical patriarchy of shaping texts about women that are misogynous and oppressive in their formulation.[27] *For example, their feminist analyses accuse the Gospel writer, Luke, of an androcentric bias that results in an unfair treatment of women. While some of their interpretive concerns regarding Luke's truncation of women's voices may be legitimate, a womanist hermeneutic, however, sees the apparent liberation of the women in Luke as more beneficial to the African American female experience than some of the critiques arising from the socio-textual analysis of feminist biblical interpretation. Thus a womanist approach to the text sees in Luke, not only a sense of fairness as it relates to women, but also a sense of compassion and concern for them. Luke established that many women, because of their gender and socio-economic status, were excluded from "community," and his message to Black women is that Jesus not only loves them but is also committed to their complete physical, emotional, social and economic restoration back into the community from which they have been alienated.*

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[27] See Schüssler-Fiorenza's article, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Luke 10:38-42," Religion and Intellectual Life 3 (1986), 21-35, and D'Angelo's article, "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View," Journal of Biblical Literature, 109/3 (1990), 441-461.

Luke's presentation of Jesus as he heals the woman with the spirit of infirmity in Chapter 13: verse 10-14, is unquestionably a passage in which the African American woman can see Jesus' uncompromising concern for her as a woman. As this bent-over, spirit-oppressed woman enters the synagogue on the sabbath, Jesus is touched with compassion for her and is moved in such a way that he heals her without any appeal from her to do so, and at the risk of incurring the wrath of his opponents (v. 14-17). In this woman, Black women who are burdened down and oppressed can see in her their experience of pain and emotional trauma, and they can also see their deliverance from that oppression. Likewise, Jesus' encounter with the woman with the issue of blood proves to be equally as affirming to Black women (Luke 8:43-48). The fact that Jesus does not hesitate to pause to minister to this woman in the midst of his dealings with the male Jarius (Luke 8: 40-56) can assuredly speak to Black women's feeling of invisibility and ostracization. That Jesus not only heals her but he restores her to complete wholeness cannot be minimized. She who has been marginalized and alienated is restored to wholeness and community. These stories and several more (eg. the widow of Nain, 7: 11-17; the woman who was a sinner, 7: 36-50; the deliverance of Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna, 8:1-3) when approached from a womanist hermeneutical foundation, give Black Christian women the opportunity to see their

experiences in the experiences of the women in the biblical text and to find liberation and hope in these stories.

Womanist Perspectives On Biblical Women

As womanist theologians assume the task of providing Christian women of African ancestry with an interpretation of scripture that is liberating and promising, they must develop a methodology and hermeneutic that is rooted in human sensitivity and contextual reality. Biblical women have traditionally been oppressed and devalued by Eurocentric analysis and the womanist contribution to the interpretive process rejects these negative analyses, as it seeks to establish Black women's identity with those Biblical women whose stories can speak to their condition and experience. In this next section, a womanist hermeneutic of liberation and affirmation will be employed as the stories of three marginalized women of the Biblical text-- "Hagar, the Egyptian, Job's Wife, and The Woman with the Issue of Blood--are explored. The experiences of these women capture the essence of Black women's experience and their ultimate liberation speaks hope to our hearts and minds.

Hagar the Egyptian (Genesis 21: 9-21)

Surface readings of both of the "Hagar stories" and (Genesis 21:9-21 and 16) and "traditional" exegetical inquiries into the texts have provided Black women with a diminutive and misleading characterization of a woman of African ancestry. Hagar has traditionally represented the "silent" third adult member of the Abraham-Sarah household: one whose role within the household could be defined as that of a slave/concubine. Within the context of the scripture, she emerges as one who is, by virtue of her status and birth-origin, inferior to Sarai and Abram, and her "objectification" by her two superiors renders her an oppressed and tragic figure. She is "given" to Abram; her body is used as the channel through which the family would acquire an heir; and she is ultimately "cast aside" when they have no more use for her. Hagar emerges as the classic example of the mistreated and unprotected Black woman in an oppressive "patriarchal" society.

An Afrocentric reading and historical/cultural/textual analyses have demanded a re-evaluation of this text as a whole. The African-American community has for centuries appropriated the Hagar stories on the basis of her blackness and mistreatment as a woman and a slave. However, contemporary exegeses reveal that Hagar can be thought of as more than a mere slave, and that there is a possibility that

there was something "unique" about her relationship with Sarai and her role in the family structure. Hagar is not just a victim of a jealous, self-centered woman who stops at nothing to achieve her own goals and accomplish her purposes, and a man who ignores her personhood and her plight. She is a woman of color whose God-encounter resulted in triumph and complete restoration. While her oppression and subjugation remain one of the atrocities of biblical tradition, womanist perspectives expose a radical and more affirming portrait of this woman.

Who was Hagar? To answer this question, it is most important to begin by looking at the historical and the socio-economic conditions as they existed when this story was written. The "J" version of the text recorded in chapter 16:1-16 uses the word shifhah to describe this woman. In the "E" story (Genesis 21:9-21), the characterization is changed to that of an amah. Both words suggest servanthood and ownership. However, the interpretation of both of these words must be examined in light of the fact that this story was set during a time that would make one question the feasibility of an Egyptian woman being a slave in a non-Egyptian household. John Waters, in his article, "Who was Hagar?", asserts that the Abrahamic period in Israel is assigned to the years 2000 to 1720 B.C.E., and this was a time when areas of Damascus and

Canaan were under Egyptian domination.[28] *Thus the question emerges: How likely is it that a woman who is a citizen of such a strong and dominant military nation would be a slave in the household of the peoples over which that nation rules? There are two possibilities here. Either Hagar is Asiatic, like most of the slaves during this period*[29] *and was "made" Egyptian/African in the retelling of the story; or this Egyptian woman originally had another, unexplained role within the Abrahamic household, but evolves as a slave in the retelling of the story. A womanist hermeneutic would certainly prefer the latter theory. In either case, one might speculate that the character of Hagar, the Egyptian slave, emerged out of the ethnically-biased inventiveness of the redactors who shaped this tradition.*

When we first meet Hagar, she is already a member of the Abrahamic household. Whether she is the shifhah of "J" version or the amah of the "E" version, she is portrayed as one who is "owned" by Sarai and Abram. But how did she come into their "possession"? How does she end up in their home? An obvious answer would be that the association began while Sarai and Abram were in Egypt (Genesis 12: 10-20). Hebrew lore claims that Hagar was the daughter of the Egyptian

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[28]John Waters, "Who Was Hagar?" in Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 189.

[29]Waters cites several sources who provide historical documentation that most of the slaves in Egypt were Asiatic during the period of the Middle Kingdom. (p.189)

"Pharaoh,"[30] so it is possible that she was a gift from the Pharaoh in whose palace Sarai resided. While there is no evidence to prove this claim,[31] it is a likely solution to the problem of when Hagar encountered the two.

The Hagar that we meet in Chapter 16: 1-6 is a childless shifhah or maid whom Sarai gives to Abram, apparently for the first time, so that she might provide Sarai with an heir, thus "building up her family." Because the word shifhah also means "a virgin," it is likely that Hagar was a virgin when she was made to lie down with Abram. This indicates that she certainly had not been treated as the typical female slave of that day who was commonly rented out (or treated) as concubines.[32] In the "J" version, when Sarai "gives" Hagar to Abram, Hagar becomes the "wife" of Abram but from every indication, she remains the subject of Sarai, or as Williams suggests, Abram gives Hagar back to Sarai.[33] Hagar, however, is portrayed as a character who "retains character and dignity," as she displays an independence, and some would argue an "arrogance," that would be more typical of a hired Egyptian servant"[34] or a

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[30]Savina Teubal, Hagar, the Egyptian (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 46.

[31]Waters, 196.

[32]Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 17.

[33]Ibid., 19.

[34]Ibid, 197.

free-woman. Clearly, with all that the two texts reveal to us within the Abraham Saga, we never get any indication that Hagar functions within the household as anything but one who bears a child (i.e. There is no indication that she functions as an ebed, a worker or "typical" slave woman). Thus, if Hagar is "hired," and is under the supervision of Sarai, a logical possibility might be that she is hired or brought into the household for the express purpose of functioning as a surrogate mother for Sarai's child.[35]

Upon her pregnancy, the writers report that Hagar "looks with contempt on her mistress," and this apparent change of attitude in Hagar causes Sarai to feel compelled to affirm her superior position to Hagar by "dealing severely with her." Humiliated and degraded, a proud Hagar rebels and runs away from the household. Hagar's insensitive and abusive attitude toward an already hurting Sarai paints a rather negative picture of the shifhah, and Sarai emerges almost as a "victim" whose harsh treatment of Hagar is somewhat justified. It must be remembered, however, that Sarai's original perception of Hagar was that of an

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[35]Delores Williams explores the idea of Hagar and her role of "surrogacy" in "A Study of the Analogous Relation Between African- American Women's Experience and Hagar's Experience", (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1990), 12.

For additional insight on the topic, also see her recent publication -- Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

"instrument and not a person,"[36] and Hagar's fertility and new role as progenitor causes Sarai to see her differently. In both episodes, she is viewed by Sarai as a threat and rival, and the "mistress" is pressed to put the maid in her place.

When the exploited Hagar runs away, she becomes the first female in biblical history to liberate herself from oppressive power structures. "Though the law prescribes harsh punishment for run-away slaves, she takes the risk rather than endure more brutal treatment by Sarai." [37] This act of self-assertion was not well viewed by Yahweh. An angel is dispatched to order Hagar back into the house of Abram. While exegetes have either criticized or justified Yahweh's demand for her return, it is clear that no theory is absolute. We will never know why God tells Hagar to return to her mistress and submit to her (Genesis 16:9), but Hagar's response is an apparent indication of her willingness to submit to the will of Yahweh. Perhaps it is the promise of a strong healthy son who would be a "wild ass of a man" (Genesis 16: 11b, 12a); or maybe it was the assurance that the Lord was not unaware of or insensitive to her plight (Genesis 16: 11d); or maybe it was fear. As

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[36]Phyllis Trible, "The Other Woman: A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Narratives," Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson, eds. James T. Butler, et. al. (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of Old Testament Press), 223.

[37]Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 19.

offended as the reader might be by Yahweh's response to Hagar's flight, however, we must acknowledge the significance of her subsequent actions. With no indication of anger, resentment or doubt, Hagar immediately validates this divine encounter by naming God. "You are El-roi," for she said "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (Genesis 16:13) It is in this wilderness experience that Hagar defies biblical tradition by receiving a covenant promise from Yahweh -- an experience usually reserved for males-- and by naming God-- an authority that no other person assumes.[38] *Though the biblical text does not say, we assume that upon the departure of the divine messenger, Hagar returns home to await the birth of her son and the fulfillment of the promise.*

The Hagar of chapter 21 is depicted more disparagingly than the Hagar of chapter 16. Her name is only mentioned once in verse 9, and her designation is changed from the shifhah *(handmaid) of the "J" story to* amah*, a slave or servant of lower status."*[39] *While* amah *is a term that suggests greater servility than* shifhah*, it is important to note the "E" does not use the common term for slave,* ebed*, in referring to Hagar.*[40] *Nevertheless, tradition claims*

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[38]See Trible, Texts of Terror, p. 17-18.

[39]Teubal, 51.

[40]Waters, 201-202.

that Hagar is no longer the "maid" of Sarai, but now is reduced to the status of slave and concubine, and the tension between the two women intensifies. In keeping with Yahweh's promise, Sarai has become Sarah (Genesis 17: 15) and has conceived and borne her husband a son. Having received a promise and a new name from Yahweh (Genesis 17), Abraham names the boy Isaac, and having herself provided Abraham with an heir, Sarah no longer needs or wants Hagar or her son, Ishmael.

In verse 9, the narrator conveys to the reader that Sarah sees more than the present scene of the two boys playing together; her glance is toward her son's future and the threat that Ishmael will pose to that future.[41] *Waters explains that according to the Code of Hammurabi and the Nuzi text, Hagar's son is a lawful heir to Abraham's inheritance.*[42] *Teubal points out that according to Babylonian inheritance customs, children acquired by a* naditu, *from another woman became the legal heirs of the* naditu, *and conjectures that it is not Abraham's estate, but her own that the matriarch (Sarah) is concerned with.*[43] *Regardless, Sarah's image changes in this version from that of a desperate barren woman, to a cold conniving mother.*

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[41]Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-26 (Minneapolis: Ausburg, 1981), 339.

[42]Waters, 201.

[43]Teubal, 119-120.

E. A. Speiser points out that while many a troubled reader has attempted to attribute Sarah's motive to the fact that the now fifteen year-old Ishmael was "abusing or mocking" the young Isaac, there is nothing in the text that would confirm that. This scene emerges as a case of nothing more that an older brother trying to amuse his younger brother.[44] *The words "son of Hagar the Egyptian who she had borne to Abraham" disclose the apparent motive for the following action. If Ishmael is a threat to Isaac, even more is Hagar a threat to Sarah. The rivalry is undeniable; jealousy and hatred are the motives.*

Verse 10 finds Sarah aggravated by what she sees, and she demands that Abraham expel the maid and her son. There is no menacing behavior to provoke Sarah this time. Hagar is voiceless, personality-less, and apparently manageable. Implying that her son is too good to play with the son of a "slave," Sarah is operating out of economic self-interest of her son[45] *and herself. She does not intend for the inheritance to be divided with Ishmael. By the dictate of the culture, the future of the woman lay with her own son and nowhere else.*[46] *Thus, not only does Sarah safeguard her own future with the elimination of Ishmael, she*

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[44]E. A. Speiser, Genesis, The Anchor Bible Series. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 155.

[45]Waters, 197.

[46]Westermann, 339.

jeopardizes the future of her rival, Hagar. Abraham resists this unfair demand in verse 11. Abraham obviously loves his son, but Trible notes that his vision only encompasses his son, Ishmael, and that he neglects his wife (or concubine) altogether.[47]

If Hagar is without an advocate in Abraham, she certainly does not find one in Elohim. God supports Sarah's irrational behavior, and admonishes Abraham to acquiesce to her demands. It is the heartless Sarah who seems to be in accord with God's divine plan for history. Von Rad calls verse 12 a "tense moment" in the structure of the narrative, "for the reader has not expected that God would be on Sarah's side, but rather on Abraham's."[48] *The voice of the Elohist's God does not fail to recognize the mother of the child that Abraham ignores, but God does minimize the importance of Hagar and her son--'your slave woman' instead of 'your wife' and 'the boy' instead of 'your son'-- and the distance that God's language places between them emphasizes that God's purpose is for Abraham to abandon any allegiance to Hagar and her son, and to focus on Sarah and Isaac. It is Isaac, not Ishmael, who is the seed from which the "chosen race" would descend.*

God's activity seems cruel, but it can be said that Elohim agrees that she must leave the Abraham household.

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[47]Trible, 233.

[48]G. Von Rad, Genesis (London: SCM Press, 1972), 233.

Just as there is a divine plan for Abraham and Isaac, so there is a plan for Hagar and Ishmael. No longer must she incur the wrath of Sarah and the indifference of Abraham. God's activity here is contrasted with the God of the "J" story, who insists that Hagar return to her oppression.

Upon the dismissal of Ishmael and his mother, God offers a blessing: a great nation will spring forth from the son of Hagar and Abraham. Even in her diminished state, Hagar is the mother of a nation. In verse 14, the storyteller portrays a resigned Abraham and a non-resistant and silent Hagar. Perhaps preferring to die in the desert than to further subject herself to the humiliations inflicted on her, she does not rebel against this injustice, nor does she beg them not to throw her out. "She leaves to enjoy a greater freedom."[49] *If voicelessness and harsh treatment in this story is tragic, even more tragic is her oppression.*

Abraham makes an almost meaningless gesture of offering minimal provisions to Hagar and her son-- bread and a skin of water-- and the two are expelled, with Abraham becoming the cruel and irresponsible father who forces Hagar into the role of "single mother." As might be expected, the water supply in the lone skin does not last long, and death lurks over the two in verse 15. The narrator neglects to tell us

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[49]Elsa Tamez, "The Woman Complicated the History of Salvation," Cross Currents (Summer 1986), 135.

much of the tragic details prior to these moments, and all that we are told is that Hagar casts her child under a bush, perhaps in an act of desperation and exasperation. The pathos and the intensity is heightened with the knowledge that Hagar can only wait for the death of her "promised" child. Because the writer uses the verb, "casts," a negative impression of Hagar is created, suggesting a harsh and brutal action toward an infant son. The probability is that the young lad fainted or dropped from exhaustion, and that a weak Hagar laid him under a bush.

Positioning herself almost out of view of her son, "a bowshot away," Hagar's silence is broken in verse 16. At last, the storyteller grants her some emotion as she cries out in despair for the condition of her son. Many Black women can identify with the devastation of this marginalized woman who cannot provide life's necessities to her offspring. Trible rejects the assertion of ancient translators who have robbed Hagar of her grief by changing the verb form for "cries" from feminine to masculine, making it the child who cries. Trible argues that the text is clear: It is Hagar who lifts her voice and weeps.[50]

And if it is Hagar who cries, the narrator asserts that it is Ishmael that God hears. (Note the allusion to "Ishmael," which means God has heard.) In response to the

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[50]Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 24.

child's voice, God reveals Gods' self to Hagar. In chapter 16, the revelation is in the form of an earthly manifestation and in verses 17 and 18 it is with a voice from heaven. God tells Hagar to "lift up the boy and hold fast to his hand," thus stressing to her that she must never leave him again. She is all that he has. The theophanic voice suggests a lifetime commitment to Hagar's son, as God promises life, land and offspring.

Who is this Egyptian woman that she is visited by God twice? Why is she numbered with Abraham, Jacob and Moses, the patriarchs who experienced theophanies? Perhaps it is as E. Tamez says--"God wants to point out that the oppressed are God's children."[51] Whatever the reason, because she is the first woman in scripture to experience a theophany, Hagar is portrayed as the first genuine matriarch of the Old Testament and she demonstrates that divine promise could be given to women (of color) and to non-Israelites.[52] Truly, God is with Hagar and, in spite of initial perceptions, should be viewed as a participant in the liberation of this woman. God's determination that Hagar would survive demonstrates to Black women God's concern for the survival of the Black community.

Hagar's vision is clouded by the apparent reality of a

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[51]Tamez, 136.

[52]Waters, 199.

water-less situation, but verse 19 finds God calling Hagar's attention to a well that was there all the time. Abandoned by her son's father, Hagar assumes the role of sole provider. While the writer in no way alludes that Hagar and her son are the tribal ancestors of the Ishmaelites, the Hagar traditions do reflect the belief of the Hebrews that they were related to the warlike Bedouin peoples of the wilderness. In the next verse the conflict is over, the tension is alleviated and stability is restored. Hagar settles into her role as single parent, and because God was with him, Ishmael grows up in the desert and becomes a masterful bowman. Because he is fatherless, his development is minus any paternal influence, and assumes the lifestyle of his mother's ancestors.

Verse 21 gives us the clearest indication that Hagar was no "typical" slave. It is the custom of Near Eastern society for the father to obtain a wife for his son and assume any cost involved.[53] *Scripture tells us that Hagar assumes Abraham's responsibility and finds an Egyptian wife for Ishmael, and the implication is that she is able to provide the necessary financial resources. Where did Hagar get the money? Waters declares that this is a clear indication that in the original story, Hagar is more than a slave woman.*[54] *It is not likely that a mere slave woman*

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[53]Speiser, 156.

[54]Waters, 202.

would have the resources to provide her son with a wife. If we consider the theory that Hagar is the daughter of the Pharaoh and a gift to Sarah, perhaps it is as Teubal says: Hagar was the companion of Sarah.[55] *This would explain why, upon her expulsion from the household, Hagar would not have been permanently destitute.*

A womanist hermeneutic of affirmation transforms Hagar in the eyes of Black women from a mistreated slave woman to an African woman, who has been robbed of her identity by a ethnic-biased/misogynist "shaping" of the biblical tradition. The portrait of Hagar in the biblical text is under-developed and misrepresented. It is obvious that she was never intended to be a figure of primary or positive focus. The speculation that she may have been someone other than an ordinary slave does not change the fact that her story is one of an oppressed woman who experiences "sexual exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, motherhood, bondage, homelessness and radical encounters with God,[56] *and Black women can participate in her liberation from the oppression of the Abraham/Sarah household and from biblical tradition.*

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[55]Teubal, 62.

[56]Delores S. Williams, "A Study of the Analogous Relation Between African-American Women's Experience and Hagar's Experience," (Ph.D diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1990) 12.

A Misunderstood Woman (Job 2: 9-10)

She is a woman buried in obscurity and anonymity. Her name is withheld from us. She is basically an ignored and overlooked woman, and the attention that is directed to her is essentially negative and condemning. Little thought is given to her plight, little consideration is given to her losses, and in the eyes of most theologians and church persons, she emerges as an evil and ungodly temptress, who was undeserving of such a Godly man as Job. St. Augustine called her an "adjutant of the devil" (diaboli adjutrix). Calvin referred to her as "an organ of Satan" (organum Satanae).[57] *For years, preachers have called her "sinful and heretical," and have compared her with Eve, Michal, and Jezebel, and the other female "villains" of the Bible. Few have viewed her as an individual, a co-sufferer with Job. Few have acknowledged her pain, her despair. Instead, she has been callously condemned, convicted and sentenced to the pages of history as a weak-minded, insensitive, and evil woman.*

However, as Black women, we can see in the character of Job's wife, a woman who experienced the same doubt and the same frustration that so many of us have experienced in our

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[57]Marvin H. Pope, Job, The Anchor Bible Series, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 21.

lifetime.[58] *Historically, we have had our babies snatched from our breast, our children shot down in the street, our husbands debilitated by the various physical and social realities, so we can identify with this woman's losses and agony. And if the truth be told, her moments of faithlessness were no greater than the moments of faithlessness and despair that we have experienced. We must not be so quick to condemn or judge her, for if we look closely, we will see much of ourselves in this woman. We cannot afford to condemn her, for we cannot be so sure that, if we were in her situation, that we would not have reacted in the same manner. For her situation clearly was not an easy one to live through or to experience. Let us look at the life of this woman.*

There was once a woman who lived in the land of Uz. She had a husband by the name of JOB. The bible says that he was a faithful man, and we must believe that she was a faithful woman.[59] *<u>They</u> had seven sons and three daughters. <u>They</u> had thousands of sheep and camels, hundreds of sheep and donkeys, and they lived in a large house with a large number or servants. <u>They</u> were two very wealthy people. Job is described as the greatest man in the kingdom, so we must believe that Jobs's wife was the greatest woman in the*

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[58]This shift to first person in this section and the next one is intentional. The identified audience is Black Christian women, and when referring to them and their experiences, the words "we" and "our" provide the platform for a stronger identification with Job's wife, and the woman with the issue of blood.

[59]Marvin H. Pope records that Rabbinic exegesis of Job 2: 10 suggests that the plural --"Shall we..." includes Job's wife, "hence the implication that she, too, was righteous." See <u>Job</u>, The Anchor Bible Series, 23.

kingdom.[60]

Then, at the hand of Satan, the test came. Biblical scholars and theologians call it "Job's Test," but we must be clear that it was "Mrs. Job's Test" too-- for when "two" become "one," there is no pain that one feels that the other does not feel. The biblical text records that one day disaster struck. Their cattle were destroyed, their sheep were killed, and their servants and their money were gone. Imagine waking up one day and having everything, but then in the course of one day losing all that you have. Even more devastating, later word came that their seven sons and three daughters were dead-- killed when a mighty wind crushed the house down upon them.

When this happened, the biblical camera focuses only on Mr. Job, providing us with a picture of his sorrow and his grief, but those of us who have the ability and the sensitivity to see the whole picture, are able to see that it was not only Mr. Job who suffered. We know that off in a corner somewhere was the mother of those children, her heart breaking, her head spinning, her body feeling crushed by the mountain of misery that had fallen in on her. The fruit of her womb, the children that she had borne, loved and nurtured were dead. "Mrs. Job's" world had been destroyed by the "heavenly wager" that had been designated for her

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[60]This is the author's paraphrase, used to show the connectedness of Mrs. Job to Job.

husband. The pain only intensifies for this woman when her husband was stricken with a horrible disease that produced sores and boils all over his body. Imagine if you will, what it must have been like for Mrs. Job -- earthly possessions gone, her children dead, and her husband pitifully sick. How much more could a woman take?

Then one day, she found her afflicted husband sitting upon a dunghill among ashes, in so much physical and emotional anguish that he sat with a sharp, ragged-edged piece of pottery in his hand, scraping and lacerating his severely inflamed body. This piteous and grievous sight must have sent Mrs. Job "over the edge." While Job's physical pain was not her physical reality, the ordeal of having to vicariously experience the demise and pain of her husband is sure to have caused a mental and emotional trauma that should not be denied or understated. Even though her physical body was intact, her mind and spirit were being destroyed, and it would have been difficult for such a tormented woman to proclaim the goodness of God in the midst of innocent, "undeserved" suffering. We cannot be surprised that she, in all of her pain and brokenness, experienced moments in which her faith faltered and cried out to him: " Do you still maintain your integrity? Curse God and die?"[61]

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[61]Carol A. Newsom, "Job," The Women's Bible Commentary, eds. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1992), 131. Newsom states

These are the words that have provoked commentators, past and present, to scorn Mrs. Job. Just as Job did not understand her anguish and spoke disparagingly of her, so have generations of men and women followed his lead. However, any woman who has experienced great loss and intense pain, can understand her outburst. She saw his agony, and she knew her own agony. Weakness, anger and frustration had overtaken her. It is probable that she suggested death to Job, because death is what she wished for herself. Her misery was so great that faith and courage were unattainable at that moment. A womanist reading would even conjecture that her audible outburst was possibly accompanied by a secret prayer for salvation and restoration. We have all said things for which we have later repented.

This woman's "human" reaction to her husband and her God has for centuries defied all notions of proper female behavior and spiritual propriety, and her radical response has offended traditional thinkers. Both the notion of euthanasia and apostasy, even in the worst of circumstances, is theologically offensive. An honest reading of the following chapters reveals, however, that her honesty and

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that Mrs. Job's question can be understood in two different ways. 1.) Do you persist in your integrity (righteousness)? Look where it has gotten you. Give it up as God has given you up. Curse God, and then die." 2.) Do you still persist in your integrity (honesty)? If so, stand by it and say what is truly in your heart. Curse God before you die."

candor only foreshadow Job's words of despair (Job 3). "Job's wife is the one who recognizes, long before Job does, what is at stake theologically in innocent suffering: the conflict between innocence and integrity, on the one hand, and an affirmation of the goodness of God, on the other.[62]

Traditional exegetes' disregard of Mrs. Job's reality of suffering is not inconsistent with typical patriarchal injustice. Because her thinking does not accommodate the ideals of patriarchal theology, Job's wife has been unfairly judged (by Job and commentators) on the basis of that incompatibility. Patriarchy has relegated her to the role of one who is morally inferior to Job, and "traditional biblical hermeneutics" have "misunderstood" her defiance of anthropocentric principles. A womanist reading, however, does not discount or minimize her experience. It sees Job's wife as the prototype of female social and religious nonconformists who challenge traditional views of God and the world. She is every woman who has, out of her pain, been forced to question the move of God. Her belief that death is a desirable alternative to oppression and suffering is one that Black people continue to confront in light of their own experiences with slavery, oppression and poverty in this country. Indeed, her questions reflect a pathos and dignity that only a woman who has hopelessly sought to

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[62]Newsom, 132.

provide healing for her broken family would understand.[63]

Job's wife remains silent in the following chapters. The reader can only make certain assumptions about her outcome. If poverty was Job's lot, so then was it her lot. His alienation from community was hers. His prolonged suffering and his moments of weakness must have consumed her life. As his physical condition and his mental and spiritual state worsened, she was present and functioning in the home. In those moments when his faith wavered, was she able to regain hers? Black women's experience could certainly shape a womanist reading that allows her the same "faith- ups-and-downs" that her husband had. It is likely that in his weakest moments, she found herself having to be strong for the both of them. We can imagine that in those times when he could not pray, she offered up prayers to Yahweh on their behalf. Our realities help us to envision the times when she like Job, knew that she had no other one to depend on but God, and like her husband, cried out "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). Her knowledge of the historical move of God and her memory of past blessings must have reminded her that, though God had been silent to this point, God would ultimately vindicate and restore them to authentic and

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[63]The Apocryphal Testament of Job portrays Job's wife as one whose devotion to her husband is demonstrated when, in order to provide for his needs, she sells her hair to buy bread.

whole existence.

Verses 10-13 of the last chapter declares that the Lord blessed the latter end of Job's life more than the beginning: his earthly possessions doubled and he had ten more children. The biblical text does not tell us otherwise, so we must assume that the mother of the last ten children was the woman who had been the mother of the first ten. Restoration and reconciliation, then, was Mrs. Job's, just as it was his. Their "longsuffering" was rewarded.

Superficial readings of the Book of Job have resulted in the Black community's identification with and appropriation of the male hero, and a rejection of his wife. Job's suffering, his faith and patience, and his ultimate restoration have traditionally spoken to the experience and hope of Black people. A womanist interpretation of this portion of the text suggests that Job's wife represents the African-American woman's experience with utter sorrow, poverty, humiliation and misunderstanding in this country. Her restoration and doubled blessings in the final chapter remind us of God's tendency to redeem even the most "un-redeemable" situations, even in spite of wavering faith. A womanist hermeneutic of affirmation encourages Black women's appropriation of the experience of Job's wife and emphasizes the possibility of relief from suffering and hopelessness.

A Desperate Woman (Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48)

Hopeless! Frustrated! Depressed! Weak! Weary! Angry! Lonely! Depressed! Desperate! All of these feelings and more could be used to describe just how she felt. For twelve long, seemingly endless years, this poor woman has suffered and endured the tragedy of a broken and sick body. For twelve long years, she has been the victim of a condition or disorder that the Gospel writer Mark and Luke describes as "an issue of blood."[64]

"The Woman with an Issue of Blood" is perhaps the most "preached about" woman in the African American Church. Her story has been told from pulpits and lecterns across this country. She is discussed in workshops and on retreats. Even more than Mary, or Esther or Ruth, the designated female heroes of the bible, this woman seems to capture our attention. There is something about her that makes us want to explore and relate to her human condition. She haunts our conscious and our subconscious realities, as she demands her place in the "Christian Hall of Fame."

She is another woman whose name does not accompany her story. The writers simply call her the "The Woman with the Issue of Blood." Unlike so many other women in the biblical text (the widow of Nain, Peter's mother-in-law, Jarius'

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[64]The phrase "with an issue of blood" is used in the King James translation of the Biblical text. The New Revised Standard Version calls her "the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages." Fitzmyer, [The Gospel According to Luke, The Anchor Bible Series. (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 746.] cites the literal translation as "a woman being with a flow of blood."

daughter, the ten virgins), "this woman is not identified by male kin (or relationships), making her status uncertain."[65] She is, rather, identified by a physical reality. She is a woman first, that is clear; but the prepositional phrase--with an issue of blood -- tells us a great deal about her. The issue of blood was her most predominant and consuming reality: it defined her personhood and it controlled her existence.

Moreover, this woman's "flow of blood" had been active for twelve years. This fact is extremely important when we note that the blood is the life-giving fluid of the body. It supplies each cell of the body with the food and oxygen needed for growth and work. Helping the body fight disease and infection, blood is necessary and vital. Thus, the loss of blood is a serious matter because its constant loss weakens one's physical condition, depletes one of strength and energy, and can ultimately result in death. Other possible physical manifestations of her loss of blood are anemia, fatigue, and weakness. Also infections, dizziness, and headaches often accompany this condition, and one thing that is almost certain, this continued blood-loss could have directly or indirectly led to her death.

Worse yet, cultic law dictated that this woman's illness would make her ritually unclean (Lev. 15:19-30), and

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[65]Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark," The Women's Bible Commentary, eds. Newsom and Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 267.

consequently everything that she touched would be unclean. "Her bleeding placed her in a perpetual state of cultic impurity that would have not only prevented her from participating in cultic activities but would also have infected anyone who touched her, lay on a bed in which she had slept, or sat in a chair she had vacated."[66] *So, more devastating than her physical condition, were the social and spiritual realities that were operative in the life of one who has suffering from an issue of blood for 12 years. In addition to being ill, she was lonely and isolated-- condemned to live in seclusion. Jewish law has judged her ritually impure, a source of contamination and unfit to be in the company of others. Much like the lepers of that day, she was "destined to live her life on the edges of the society, untouched, unloved, an outcast judged guilty by her body."*[67] *Even if she had at one time been fortunate enough to have a husband and children, she could no longer be a part of their lives. Thus, because she was not able to enter any of the places of worship, her condition had cut her off from all humanity and divinity.*

Another ramification of her illness was poverty. It is likely that she was wealthy at one time, (Mark 5:26, Luke 8:43), but all of her money and earthly possessions had been

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[66]Tolbert, 268.

[67]Joyce Hollyday, Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 1994), 190.

depleted in an attempt to retain physicians to cure her.[68] *None of the physicians had been able to provide a cure for her, and rather than getting better, the bleeding continued and she grew worse.*[69]

This woman's physical condition had surely resulted in a degree of emotional damage. When one is despised, rejected, and made to feel inferior and unclean, her mind and emotions begin to move into an unhealthy state. A womanist interpretation could easily assume that low self-esteem, self-pity, self-hatred, anger, anxiety, depression and hostility were by-products of her ailments. She could not love herself, because she had not received love for a long time. Many a day and night probably found her crying and cursing the day that she was born. Keeping her sanity must have been a daily determination.

One day she heard that Jesus was passing through town. Even her isolation did not prevent her from hearing the

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[68]The medicines and treatments prescribed for this illness were no doubt many and varied. William Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974),192] cites Preuss as providing information on the likely treatments for this condition -- 1.) Drinking a goblet of wine containing a powder compounded from rubber, alum and garden crocuses. 2.) Persian onions cooked in wine administered with the summons, "Arise out of your flow of blood!" 3.) Sudden shock. 4.) The carrying of the ash of an ostrich's egg in certain cloth.

[69]Fitzmyer (p.746) notes that Luke does not criticize the physicians as severely as Mark does. "If Luke, the Beloved Physician, is the author of Luke-Acts, then one could understand his reluctance to incorporate the Marcan criticism."

reports of Jesus' healing ministry.[70] *Disillusioned with doctors, her desperation moved her to seek healing through her own initiative. She rightly responds to the report that he was a man of miracles by attempting to get to him. Her instinct told her that if she could just get to Jesus and touch the hem of his garment, she would be healed.*[71] *Without encountering him, she had the faith to believe that mere contact with his clothes would be sufficient. Her plan was an audacious and risky one because she would violate social codes for proper female behavior and would break religious law. (It was believed that her touch would transfer her impurity to Jesus).*[72] *Nevertheless, she is desperate, and her desperation empowers her to do a desperate thing. The woman ascended from her home of isolation, walked through the streets, and when she came upon him, reached out and touched the hem of Jesus' robe.*

Scripture tells us that the very moment that the woman touches Jesus' clothes, her flow of blood ceased and she knew that her healing had come (Mark 5:30, Luke 8:44). Jesus immediately discerned that his body has also changed

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[70]C. S. Mann, Mark, The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City: Doubleday, 1986), 285.

[71]Note: Luke does not mention her inner thought.

[72]Tolbert, 268.

and that the "power" has just gone from his body.[73] *The question "Who touched me?" seems almost foolish in the midst of such a large crowd, and the disciples said as much (Mark 5:31, Luke 8:45). Their impatience bespeaks a desire to be about the business at hand -- accommodating the male Jarius -- and "it also betrays that they had no understanding of what had taken place."*[74] *Jesus, however, would not disregard the "depleting" touch and he called the woman forth to make her healing public. No doubt, he knows that if her healing had taken place without making it public, "she would have the utmost difficulty in removing from the inhabitants of the town the prejudice and scorn that she had met with for years."*[75] *Because Jesus wanted to see her full restoration to the religious and social community, he insisted that she reveal her identity.*

Realizing that she cannot hide herself, the woman comes forward in obedience and fell at Jesus' feet, confessing her deed and acknowledging her healing (Mark 5:33, Luke 8:47). Her earlier bold and aggressive behavior is replaced with fear and trembling. Immediately, Jesus

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[73]Lane (192-193) notes that Jesus possesses the power of God as representative of God. Nevertheless, God remains in control of God's power, and the healing of this woman comes because of God's free and gracious decision to bestow upon her the power which was active in Jesus.

[74]Lane, 193.

[75]Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary of the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 261.

affirmed this woman as he called her "daughter." This affectionate term is used to reassure her that she is now a part of Israel.[76] *He then informed her that her faith in God had provided her healing. She can now know peace and wholeness (Mark 5:34).*

When read from a womanist point of view, the text's portrayal of this woman's suffering and marginalization gives her a universal significance. She is "every Black woman," and her plight is consistent with the norms of Black women's experience in this country. She is the paradigm of the isolation, ostracization and poverty that have been their plight. From the beginning of our lives here in this country, the physical reality of our Black skin has relegated us to a life much like the one that this woman must have led. Black women have been made to feel dirty, inferior, and unworthy to mingle with the rest of society. Slavery, Jim Crow/Jane Crow Laws, lynchings, mysterious murders have been our experience. Segregated water fountains, rest room facilities, and lunch counters have been the symbols of our "uncleanness," our exclusion from the mainstream of humanity has robbed us of opportunities of economic development, adequate education, and decent living conditions. Indeed, our physical realities have condemned us to an "outcast-existence" comparable to hers. The loss of pride, self-esteem, self-respect and culture has resulted

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[76]Fitzmyer, 747.

in an inauthentic and oppressed existence. Our universal body has been loosing the essence of that which would keep a race of people alive. The women and the men of the Black Church have so strongly identified with this woman because we are the people with an issue of blood.

Indeed, the Black Church as a whole, has so pervasively acknowledged this woman's suffering and healing because a black hermeneutic reveals that she is one who speaks directly to our condition and experience. She is one whose life we live and whose sorrow we feel. Her suffering is best felt by a people who suffer. Her desperation and frustration is the embodiment of Black people's intense desire for wholeness and restoration to legitimate personhood. Her healing and affirmation by Jesus sustain the hope that the black community has for continued divine intervention and approval. She is the prototype of faith, humility, tenacity and determination that we who are engaged in the human struggle are challenged to emulate and imitate. Because her faith and determination effected her healing, she is the woman who shows us how to turn our tragedies into triumph and sorrow into joy. The desperate act of defying religious and social tradition, of risking her life to gain a better one, and emptying herself of shame and fear empowers us to appropriate her desperation, courage and press toward wholeness.

CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that the Bible continues to be an instrument of liberation for the African American Christian community. Though scholars, preachers and lay people alike have established that certain texts are inexcusably oppressive to women, it is the task of the womanist reader to extract from the whole of the biblical text a meaning and interpretation that provides liberation and hope for all of humanity. It is imperative that Black female readers understand that biblical interpretation is subjective and can be the result of their own experience and tradition. It becomes the responsibility of womanist theologians to develop personal reading strategies and interpretations that reject the traditional interpretations that have sought to diminish or devalue Black women. We must find in the Bible a divine hope and promise that consistently affirm African American women's humanity and give them a positive presence in the text. The Bible is authoritative and liberating in the lives of African American women only when our interpretive process allows our voices to be proclaimed and our faces to be uncovered within that text that we have come to love and value.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMANIST THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

African-American females generally share a common experience of being Black and female in a society that denigrates and vilifies them. Fighting against the stereotypical images of "sex object," " whore," "Sapphire," "Aunt Jamima" and "Mammy", they have had to deconstruct the conceptual contrivances of the larger society, and provide for themselves and the dominant group new perceptions of their realities. The pursuit of self-definition and liberated thinking to confront their own victimization has led Black women to new avenues of expression. In discussing the journey toward self-definition, Patricia Hill Collins writes:

> The insistence of Black female self-definition reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image--namely, refuting the Black matriarchy thesis--to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself. By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African American women, but the credibility of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are en-titled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-

> definition, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects.[1]

Womanist theology emerged as a radical and vital move on the part of African American Christian women to define and affirm themselves within the context of their own history and experiences with racism and sexism in the Church and society. It emerged as an inevitable and necessary response to feminist and Black liberation theologies. While professing to speak to the totality of women's oppression and Black people's marginalization, those theologies proved to be guilty of the same crimes that they accused the White, male-dominated systems of perpetrating against women and African Americans. Feminist theology spoke to the oppression that Black women experience in the patriarchialism of the Church and society, but feminist theology was insensitive to (and often participated in) Black women's experiences with racism. Likewise, Black theology addressed Black women's issues of racism but refused to acknowledge its own sexist articulation and actions. Thus, in their determination to be affirmed and heard in the sound of their own diverse and multi-dimensional voices, African American women, were forced to break with the feminist and Black liberation traditions. Black women gave birth to their own theology, which they

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[1]Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 106-107.

coined "womanist."[2]

The 1960's and 1970's gave birth to liberation movements that rocked the very foundations of American and European traditions. It was during this period that the voices of oppressed peoples all over the world began to cry out for freedom from the White-male-dominated structures that had deprived them of full and equal participation in the mainstream of society, and had also caused them to accept and internalize negative and degrading images about themselves. African Americans, South Africans, Latin Americans, Asians, and Euro-American women began to evaluate and challenge every aspect of the racist, classist or sexist experience in which they existed, and liberation movements aimed at eliminating oppressive structures erupted throughout the world.

It is out of the context of these critiques that liberation theologies have evolved and collided with the traditional Christian theologies of Europe and North America. Traditional theologies had developed a White, middle-class, patriarchal interpretation of Scripture,

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[2]Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose (Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii. Walker cites that the term "womanist" has its origins in the black folk expression, "You acting womanish," ...wanting to know more and in greater depth that is good for one... outrageous, audacious and willful behavior. She is "responsible, in charge, serious...." and is committed to the survival of her people and their culture. She loves men, women, and herself. A womanist is a black feminist or a feminist of color; "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

experience and tradition, as they attempted to interpret God's activity among people. It was the task of liberation theologies to analyze and expose the injustices of such theological assertions, and to reject them, even as liberation theologies offered alternatives to an ideology which oppressed human beings.

It must be noted, however, that while liberation theologies had successfully upset the equilibrium of those theological systems guilty of oppression, those same theologies had been so "narrow" and one-dimensional in their articulation that they ignored and even participated in other forms of oppression. This is especially true of the two dominate liberation theologies of North America--Black Theology and feminist Theology. While Black theology rejected racism, it had been primarily voiced by Black men who embraced sexism with much candor and tenacity; and while feminist theology renounced sexism, it had been the work of White women who have unashamedly clung to a racist perspective that had spurned and oppressed women of color. In both instances, the victims of these theologies were Black women. The "most oppressed of all the oppressed,"[3] Black women determined to seek liberation from all racist, classist and sexist structures. Womanist theology arose

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[3]Jacquelyn Grant, "God Theology and the Black Woman," in Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979, eds. Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 419.

from the desire of Black women to address their tri-dimensional oppression from their own theological perspectives.

Confronting Black Male Hypocrisy

One of the most painful realities that Black women in America have had to endure was their experience of oppression at the hand of Black men. It was painful, because having shared the same African heritage, the same slave ships, the same cotton fields and the same segregated water fountains, the logical assumption was that the mutual oppression and suffering of Black women and men in racist America had created such a bond that sexism would not have been a reality "within" the Black community. Since Black men had rejected the racism of the patriarchal structures of America, it was difficult for Black women to understand how their "co-sufferers" could continue to embrace the White patriarchal model of female oppression. As they began to gain in "power and participation" in a male-dominated America, Black men used that power to subjugate the same women who had been in the struggle with them. Consequently, Black women had to "reevaluate their position when their men's treatment of them made it evident that "manhood" was being defined 'within the paradigms constructed by white

patriarchy.'"[4]

With the emergence of the Black liberation theology, most Black women endured and were "publicly" silent about the sexism of Black men, not because they did not desire to end their maltreatment, but because they felt that the most important issue was liberation from racist oppression. Their subtle and overt gender-oppressed-realities within the Black community were so glaringly akin to patriarchal oppression that soon Black women did not continue to suppress their hurt and indignation. The same thirst for human dignity that made them speak out against the injustices of racism also compelled them to end their silence about the sexist treatment at the hands of Black men.

Because they were reluctant to speak the antagonistic, divisive language of the feminist movement that emerged in the 60's, Black women's voices took a conciliatory tone. They realized that there remained the need for partnership with Black men as they struggled against racism in America. With the continued and sustained misogynist thinking and actions of Black men in their home, community and Church, however, Black women's discontent surfaced and went public. Aretha Franklin's recordings of "Respect" and "Do Right

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[4]Kelly Delaine Brown-Douglass, "Womanist Theology: What Is Its Relationship to Black Theology?" in Black Theology: A Documentary History--Volume Two: 1980-1992, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 295.

Woman--Do Right Man" were some of the first of many signals sent to Black men of the 60's that all was not well on the home front. Franklin's demands in these selections for equality and an understanding relationship with Black men clearly set the tone for that which would emerge as the basis of the Black women's liberation movement of the seventies. Toni Cade's, The Black Woman, Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf, and Michele Wallace's Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman, came later to "reaffirm Black women's commitment to the Black struggle for freedom, while signaling their determination to be accepted as equal partners in that struggle and in the Black community itself."[5] Perhaps Black women thought that their "signaling" would be enough to heighten Black men's awareness of their oppressive actions and insensitivity to their women's pain and dissatisfaction. They hoped that their call for equality would heighten the humanity and consciousness of Black men and challenge them to abandon their sexist behavior. That did not happen, however. James

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[5]Kelly D. Brown, "God is as Christ Does: Toward a Womanist Theology," The Journal of Religious Thought, vol. 46, no. 1 (Summer-Fall, 1989), 12.

Also see Toni Cade, ed., The Black Woman (New York: Signet Books, 1970); Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girl's Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf (New York: MacMillan, 1975); Michelle Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (New York: Dial Press, 1978).

Cone writes of Black male's response when the issue of Black male sexism was first raised by Black women around Union Theological Seminary in New York City and other places.

> ".....Black men misused their (Black women's) silence by refusing to even consider that sexism was a real problem in the Black community. Black men continued to claim that 'Black women have always been free'"[6]

Cone also writes:

> "Because Black men knew that Black women were deeply committed to the racial struggle, they did not even take seriously Black women's concern for sexual oppression. They merely laughed, treating the hurt and the pain of our sisters as a joke."[7]

Black men's definition of "freedom" clearly meant freedom for racism for Black men. Even though they talked about human equality as they struggled for freedom from racism, they had themselves adopted their oppressors' patriarchal structures and embellished the notion of male supremacy and domination. Ironically, they allowed the same traditions which had fought so hard to preserve Black enslavement, colonialism and imperialism provide the normative perception of women for Black society. Black men had allowed the "enemy" to define the realities of the Black woman in their own communities, and they perpetuated the same oppression

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[6]James Cone, My Soul Looks Back (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 118.

[7]James Cone, For My People (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 131.

they claimed to abhor. Jacquelyn Grant, who made one of the earliest critiques of Black liberation theology's exclusion of Black women's experience, puts it into perspective:

> "Ironically, the criticism that liberation theology makes against classical theology has been turned against liberation theology itself. Just as most European and American theologians have acquiesced in the opppression of the West, for which they have been taken to task by liberation theologians, some liberation theologians have acquiesced in one or more oppressive aspect of the liberation struggle itself. Where racism is rejected, sexism has been embraced. Where classim has been called into question, racism and sexism have been tolerated and where sexism is rupudiated, racism and classism are often ignored.[8]

Indeed, when Black women realized that their freedon was not a priority in the fight for liberation, they were compelled to challenge their male counterparts on theological issues. Black men had chosen to forget, overlook and deny that the same Bible that rejects racism, often rejects sexism. The holistic and inclusive interpretation of the gospel that Black men purported in the Civil Rights Movements definitely required that Black women be liberated from androcentrism and sexist marginality. Grant further challenges:

> It is difficult to understand how Black men manage to exclude the liberation of Black women from their interpretation of the liberating gospel. Any correct analysis of the poor and oppressed would reveal some interesting and inescapable facts about the situation

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[8]Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in Black Theology: A Documentary History --Volume One: 1966-1979, 323.

of women within oppressed groups.[9]

If Black liberation thinking was authentic and grounded in a liberating anthropology and theology, inherent in that tradition would be the affirmation that just as "in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek", likewise, "in Christ there is neither male nor female."[10] Black women's liberation thinking envisioned a religio-socio-cultural system that fostered equality for all Black people-men, women and children.

When many Black women saw that their "brothers" refused to take their cry for justice seriously, they could no longer completely reject the white feminist movement from which they had remained apart. No longer could they assert that the struggle for women's rights was solely a White middle-class phenomenon which was unrelated to the Black community's liberation movement. Black women were forced to question and challenge the Black man's commitment to the Black liberation struggle, in light of his conscious oppression of Black women.

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[9]Ibid., 332.

[10]Martin, "Womanist Interpretation of the New Testament," 51.

Feminist Theology Not The Answer For Black Women

Initially, Black female theologians who embraced feminist theology were called and called themselves "Black feminists." Their experiences with sexism, both inside and outside their community, forced Black women of the seventies to try to identify with White women's experiences with sexist oppression. They attempted to move in feminist liberation circles, just as their nineteenth century ancestors had affiliated with the women's suffrage movement. However, history repeated itself as it became obvious to Black women that the feminist movement, like its predecessor, was not for non-white women. The feminist movement had been completely and narrowly defined by White women and its ideologies and tradition were grounded in White women's history and experiences only. It was a game in which White women established the rules and then solicited others to play only according to their rules.[11]

White women's analysis was one-dimensional and did not appropriately communicate or honestly reflect Black women's cultural realities and experiences with sexism, racism and classism. It soon became apparent that "the biological realties of Blackness and femaleness [gave] Black women a unique status in a society that tend[ed] to devalue both

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[11]Jacquelyn Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 200.

Blackness and women"[12] and Black women soon came to the realization that there was very little "common ground" on which they and their White counterpart could establish a theological framework and methodology. Although they shared with White women in the inferior position assigned to females in this sexist society, the fact that patriarchy had given White females a position of power (which they have exercised) over Black women had created a breach which could be neither denied or minimized.

Delores Williams challenged feminist theology's definition of patriarchy which names men as the sole oppressors of Black women. Williams claims that the experience of Black females is misrepresented when their oppression is expressed in terms of a language that only identifies men as oppressors of women.[13] To define "patriarchy" as "rule by men," and to name it as the structure that is responsible for the oppression of all women denies the role that White women have chosen as oppressors of Black women. While patriarchy may describe the White feminists' oppression, it is also the institution that has designed and encouraged their oppression of Black women. Hence, a nomenclature that named patriarchy as the evil that oppresses all women was inadequate for the naming

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[12]Brown, 8.

[13]Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," The Journal of Religious Thought 43, no.1, (Spring-Summer 1986): 50.

of the control and subjugation of Black women by White males and females.

> The failure of white feminists to emphasize the substantial difference between their patriarchally-derived-privileged-oppression and black women's demonically-derived-annihilistic-oppression renders black women invisible in feminist thought and action.[14]

The truth is, White women were interested only in eliminating (their own) sexist oppression, and Black women, being excluded from feminist articulation were left without a language and theological voice that reflected their unique history and experience. Williams offers the term "demonarchy" as the adequate description of the "demonic governance of Black women's lives by White male and female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, retardation, and death as instruments of social control."[15] Grounded in the belief that White men are the "ultimate" of all humanity and that White women are superior to and more precious than all other women of color, demonarchy is the term that accurately describes the racist-gender oppression of Black women.[16]

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[14]Ibid., 50.

[15]Ibid., 52.

[16]"Demonarchy" is a term used by Delores Williams in her article, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue" printed in The Journal of Religious Thought, 43, no. 1, (Spring-Summer 1986) : 52. Demonarchy is defined by Williams as the demonic governance of black women's lives by White male and White female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, and retardation and death as instruments of social control. Further, it is informed by a

The "uncommonness" of goals and agenda is also evidenced in Rosemary Ruether's article, "Feminist Theology and Spirituality." Insisting that the need for feminist theology arises out of the historical reality of sexism in human societies, she defines the authentic meaning and message of feminist theology as "redemption from sexism."[17] She further conjectures that the ultimate goal of the Church, if it is to be true to its' call and intent, is the establishing and maintaining of feminist liberation communities in which women will experience and shape a community of liberation from sexism. Ruether sees feminist theology as the healing agent for the diseased patriarchical Christian Church, and suggests that it (feminist theology) can essentially convert Christian theology into a human-centered theology that affirms the personhood of men and women alike. This was the basic premise upon which feminist theology was built. Sexism was the only real sin, and redemption and true liberation would be achieved through the elimination of sexism in language, the university, the home, the Church, etc. Delores Williams' response to Ruether's definition of sin and her vision for an authentic Christian Church states clearly the Black woman's objection to the

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consciousness that believes White women are superior to Black women.

[17]Rosemary Reuther, "Feminist Theology and Spirituality," adapted for Christianity and Crisis, March 4, 1985, 57-62.

language and methodology of feminist theology.

> "In this instance, Ruether fails to envision a contemporary understanding of church that also seeks to live its faith as repentance of racism and classism. When the North American church lives only to repent of sexism and move away from patriarchy, it remains a diseased, sinful institution registering no concern for poor, Black women and women of color. When Anglo-American feminist theologians advocate transformation in social and religious institutions only on the basis of the gender oppression, these theologians inadvertently reinforce another evil that continues to prevail in most theological academies: the evil of white supremacy." [18]

While African-American women acknowledged and abhorred the existence of sexism inside and outside the academies and the Christian Church, and while they were the "victims" of sexist institutions and acts perpetrated by both White and African-American men, to embark upon a one-dimensional theological intent would have been self-injurious and short-visioned. African-American women's theology needed to confront the full gambit of "sins" that oppressed them and their community. Black women's concerns were undeniably different from that of White women. Williams points this out to her colleague when she refutes her suggestion that a point of unity among White, African, African-American and Asian Christian women is based on their "alleged corroboration of the 'legitimacy of encountering the divine

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[18]Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism," 158-16.

as goddess.'" Williams sees a problem and basic lack of sensitivity with Ruether's assertion because "the divine goddess is a concern emphasized in white feminist theology...." There is not enough data to suggest that this is a major concern for other Christian women of color.[19]

In addition, African-American Christian women's love of the Spirit, and the respect that they show for the presence and the work of the spirit is not reflected in feminist theology. The White feminist emphasis on language, liturgy and symbolism used in the worship experience is basically secondary to Black Christian women: their first desire for the worship experience is that the Spirit would move in such a way that it ministers healing and liberation to the entire Church community. Likewise, Jacquelyn Grant rightly contends that feminists have failed to deal with the Black women's Jesus, as Jesus has been revealed to and experienced by Black women. White women theologians have been so preoccupied with the maleness of Jesus, that they have essentially scorned Black women's understanding of the significance of Jesus and their comfort with his gender. For Black women the "significance of Christ is not his maleness, but his humanity."[20] It is the humanity of Christ, the reality of his experiences with oppression and his ultimate victory over that oppression that have enabled

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[19]Ibid., 164.

[20]Grant, 220.

her to identify with him as "the God of the oppressed."

Lastly, feminist thinkers largely have not acknowledged that the Bible continues to provide the framework for the Christian Black woman's religious and theological thought. Their critique of the biblical text is situated in White women's experience, but for Black women to do theology, the scripture must be read, heard and engaged within the context of her own experience. "Black women of the past did not hesitate in doing this, and we must do no less."[21] More and more, Black women were (and still are) in love with themselves, their culture, their history, their community and their God. They developed a theology which called for a holistic healing and redemption of the Black community, the Church, the academies, and society. There had to be an atmosphere in which they had the "freedom to explore the particularities of Black women's history and culture without being guided by what White feminists have already identified as women's issues."[22] The intellectual and spiritual call was for African-American Christian women to "transcend" feminist theology and adopt a "multidialogical intent" which would allow Christian women "to advocate and participate in dialogue and action with many diverse social, political, and religious communities concerned about human survival and

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[21]Ibid., 212.

[22]Ibid., 182.

productive quality of life for the oppressed."[23] African-American Christian women "determined that they and the entire race will survive." "The details of that determination" had to be expressed in a theological statement.[24] Thus womanist theology evolved.

Womanist Theology emerges from the African-American community and experience, and its path of development has been from the community into the academy (in contrast to those theologies which were born in the academy and traveled into the community). Its presence in the academy and its emergence as a viable "theology" is clearly owed to the expressed dissatisfaction of a large number of African-American women, inside and outside the academy, with the power arrangements of society. Womanist theologians resented the lack of integrity that characterized the traditions of their so-called "advocates," and brought forth a "privatized" theology that rejected the Black woman's traditional "assigned" roles in society and within the Black community. Their experience as wife, lover, mother and sister was so significant, however, that her fight for liberation and deliverance from all oppressive

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[23]Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology," in Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, ed. J. Plaskow and C. Christ, 184.

[24]Delores Williams, "The Black Woman Portrayed in Selected Black Imaginative Literature and Some Questions for Black Theology" (M. Div. thesis, Union Theological Seminary), 75.

structures could not be to the exclusion of the Black family. The knowledge that White American families (fathers, mothers, children) in every social class have the power to oppress the Black family (mothers, fathers, children) dictated that her goals for Black woman's liberation could not be separated from her desire for her family's liberation.[25] (even the reality Black-male-oppression could not distract Black women from their commitment to their liberation.) Theirs would, indeed, be a "universal" effort to raise the consciousness of the whole of humanity in regard to gender, race and class oppression.

Womanist theologians span the socio-economic, political, and educational gambit of the African-American Christian community, and it is expressed in the language of women who are committed to the validation of the Black experience in society, religion and in history. Every womanist theologian is a mother, for though she may or may not have borne a child, she nurtures all Black people in the liberation struggle; she is a "contemporary prophet, calling other women forth so that they can break away from the oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality."[26] She is preacher, teacher and a

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[25]Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," 55.

[26]Katie Geneva Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 40.

student, who takes seriously her responsibility to discover truth and articulate it in a language that guarantees and strengthens her own self-importance and that of her community. She loves herself, her Jesus, and knows that God is a Spirit who is free of gender and racial designation. She is "empowered by the knowledge the she knows best how to fight for her own liberation and the liberation of her people,"[27] and her commitment is to that liberation. African American Christian women's gift to themselves, their community and humankind is womanist theology, and as Black women develop and expand, it will develop and expand, and together they will create and discover new dimensions of personhood, worship experiences and life in their community.

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[27]Delores S. Williams, " 'The Color Purple'" Christianity and Crisis, (July, 1986), 230-232.

CHAPTER FOUR

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF MODEL OF MINISTRY

The Methodology

The history of the African American Church reveals that this institution has often represented for its community, both a source of spiritual development, and economic, social, and emotional nurture. For a people who have experienced widespread oppression and isolation in this country, the Church has been the institution that lent them money when the banks would not, buried their dead when there were no insurance policies, promoted and exhibited individual and collective talents and skills that the larger culture would have ignored, addressed social issues that impaired the quality of life and provided a much-needed social outlet. In short, the African-American Church has emerged, from its very beginning, as the center of life in the Black community. To be sure, the Gospel challenges the Church to be a liberating and enabling entity that ministers to the "whole" person. Thus the role of the Black Church and its preachers in the 1990's is more crucial and necessary than ever. The violence, oppression and depravity that effect every area of the African American community compels "the called and sent" to make a difference in the

lives of Black women and men, as we make ministry relevant and transforming.

The Allen Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica, New York, is a 6000 member congregation, of which at least two-thirds are women. The fact that there are approximately four thousand women and four thousand "stories", sets of issues, and levels of brokenness in our congregation dictates the development of a meaningful and relevant seven-day-a-week ministry that addresses the melange of spiritual, social, physical and emotional needs. The trauma of unhappy, love-deficient marriages or relationships (often characterized by physical and /or emotional abuse), the frustration and loneliness that accompanies divorce, single parenting, and the life-altering effects of crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, incest and rape consume and inflict the realities of too many women within the congregation. As a result, self-hatred, guilt, depression, anxiety and emotional instability are evils that attack the females of the religious community. The Church must offer hope for renewal and a commitment to the universal health and well-being of these women who are in pain. The preaching moment, then, must be viewed as a time of proclamation to "infirmed" and hurting women.

Considering the issues confronting Christian women of African ancestry who are members of Allen Church, and observing their patterns of church/workshop/bible study

attendance, it becomes apparent that it is essential that the preaching moment reflect a sensitivity to the realities of those women to whom we preach. While the church often sponsors forums and events that would speak to Black women's issues, the numbers of women present at these events are significantly lower than they are on Sunday morning. Between the three morning worship services at Allen, there are approximately 1700 to 2000 women present. In addition, about 100 adults and almost 300 young women between the ages of 13 and 18, are in attendance at the youth service. Workshops, retreats, and Bible studies for women are assuredly meaningful and liberating for the ten to twenty percent of females who avail themselves to these encounters, but it is the Sunday morning preacher who consistently stands before the majority of the women in the congregation.

Since the people of God bring their various needs, concerns, expectations, and brokenness to the worship experience, it would be inexcusably negligent for those of us who preach to these women Sunday after Sunday not to assume the responsibility of preaching sermons that 1) expose the internal and external sin, evil and oppression that effects their lives, 2) affirm the personhood of all women of color, 3) proclaim a liberating truth and teaching that transforms and empowers even the weakest or the most broken vessel. This philosophy of preaching is borne out in the Lucan story of the woman who was crippled by a spirit.

> *Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." (Luke 13: 10-12)*

In this scene, we find Jesus in the synagogue teaching (or preaching)[1]*, when in the midst of his discourse, he saw a bent over woman, called her to come closer to him, spoke her healing, and set her free from the spirit that had crippled her for so long. Ergo, those of us who are commissioned to proclaim the Gospel are challenged to do as Jesus did: see women who are crippled by spirits, call them to a place of spiritual availability and accessibility, and speak words of healing to them--words that will empower and set them free from their infirmities.*

Womanist preaching then, if it is anything, is corrective and should elicit a positive, constructive and life-changing response from the targeted community. It must not only proclaim the Word of God, and communicate the healing contained therein, but the women who hear the gospel must perceive it as truth, and be motivated to be "transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2) and actions. It should so inform, energize, reprove and correct those who perceive it correctly and receive it

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[1]See Joseph A. Fitzmyer's explanation of the verb **didaskein, "teach"** in The Gospel According to Luke I-IX, The Anchor Bible Series (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 148. He concludes that the verb, didaskein, used in this pericope would indicate that Jesus was "preaching".

fully, that they will not be able to dismiss or repress it. Preaching that is grounded in a womanist hermeneutic, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has the potential to be so utterly penetrating and charismatic for those in the assembly that, to use Jeremiah's language, it will be "like fire shut up in their bones." (Jeremiah 20:9)

Thus, the goal of this project was to explore the theological and theoretical principles that yield a womanist "hermeneutic of healing", and to apply those principles so that preaching communicates liberation and healing. Likewise, the project objective was to survey and evaluate the effect and significance of womanist preaching in lives of the women of the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church. With this in mind, a group of 10 women from the church acted as a test-group or proving-ground for my theological and pedagogical findings. The women chosen to be participants were those who were admittedly women who had experienced incest, rape, alcoholism and physical and emotional abuse. After individual conversations which solicited and confirmed their willingness to participate in the project, letters further explaining the nature of the project and officially inviting them to participate were hand delivered to the identified women. Also contained in the correspondence was the first meeting date, which was set for January, 1994.

At that first meeting, after a period of introduction

and dialogue, preliminary questionnaires were distributed. These questionnaires were designed to reveal unresolved issues, areas of brokenness and levels of bondage, insecurity, fear, pain, unforgiveness, etc. The women were given two weeks to return the forms. The women committed to regular attendance at Sunday service for one year--January, 1994 through January, 1995. They were also given a number of sermon-evaluation forms to use to assess the "healing nature" of specified (by project coordinator) or selected (by women) sermons that spoke to their woundedness. Tapes were also provided for the women who could not be at specified services and for those who wanted to hear sermons a second time.

The group formally met six times over the twelve month period. At these meetings, discussion centered around sermonic content, personal responses to sermons, and the ways in which particular sermons ministered to the pain, concerns and conflicts of those in the group.

At the end of the one year period, a Final Evaluation Form was distributed. The forms were designed to elicit evaluative responses of the sermon listening/evaluating process over the past year and its impact on the individual lives of the women.

The compilation of the survey responses, and consideration of oral and behavioral responses, supported the theoretical and theological principles offered in the

"scholarly" portion of this project. These practical findings validated suggestions of a "healing" model of ministry for African American women in the Church.

The project not only alludes to the need for an exegetical and interpretive process that makes the biblical text relevant and meaningful within the context of the sermon, but it led to the formation of a definition of "womanist preaching," and the identification of primary biblical paradigms that form a definitive conceptual framework for womanist sermons. Moving beyond the theoretical underpinnings that evolved, the exegetical process used in sermon development was the result of the application of the hermeneutical and homiletical tools offered in the previous chapters.

The Preparation

Since it is undeniable that traditional preaching, with all of its patriarchal and misogynist underpinnings, has been one of the primary contributors to Black female oppression in the home, church and community, it is incumbent for those committed to healing the woundedness among women to gain the knowledge to facilitate their healing. One of the important ingredients which aids preachers in the development of exegetical methodologies that yield a womanist hermeneutic of healing is the use of resources that explore the nuances of sources, effects and

responses surrounding the pain of women. All preachers, even those who are themselves survivors of rape, incest, abuse, etc., should avail themselves to the body of literature on the market that will broaden their knowledge and heighten their sensitivity to women's issues.

In preparation for this project, numerous books and articles were read that facilitated the exploration of the religious roots of the rape, incest and abuse of women, the psychological impact of these evils, and the role of the Christian Church in addressing them. In addition to the books cited in the text of this paper, some of the key works that were read are: Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse--A Feminist Critique, Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds.; Pastoral Care of Battered Women, Rita-Lou Clarke; Sexual Violence--The Unmentionable Sin and Is Nothing Sacred? (When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship), Marie M. Fortune; Inner Healing for Broken Vessels--Seven Steps to Mending Childhood Wounds, Linda Hollies; Father-Daughter Incest, Judith Lewis Herman; Spare The Child--The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse, Philip Greven; Christianity and Incest, Annie Imbens and Ineke Jonker; Voices In The Night--Women Speaking About Incest, Toni A. H. McNaron and Yarrow Morgan,eds.; When Aids Comes to Church, William E. Amos; The Wounded Woman--Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship, Linda Schierse Leonard; Necessary Losses, Judith Viorst; Codependent No More -- How

to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself, Melody Beattie; *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck; and *Breaking the Cycle of Abuse--A Biblical Approach to Recognizing and Responding to Domestic Violence*, Catherine L. Scott. These resources provided knowledge that helped in the development of a hermeneutic of healing for hurting women and contributed to the shaping of this project. Also, the following writings on "Black preaching" and biblical interpretation were read: *The Holy Spirit and Preaching*, James Forbes; *Biblical Interpretation*, Randolph W. Tate; *Interpreting God's Word In Black Preaching*, Warren H. Stewart, Sr.; *The Preaching Event*, John R. Claypool; and *"How Shall They Hear?" : Effective Preaching for Vital Faith*, Samuel Proctor. Another component of the preparation for this project was dialogue with women. Bible studies for women, private counseling sessions, one-on-one encounters, and even encounters at the altar birthed a sensitivity to the need and the importance of addressing the pain of women through sermon. While it was impossible to have occasion and time to interface with all of the women of the church, a few "real life examples" from within the congregation gave substantial insight into the issue of brokenness and the necessity for healing.

The development of the sessions design and evaluation instruments for this project was also influenced by one consultant and the Context Resource Group. Through one-on-

one conversations, they recommended books, helped with the language of the evaluative instruments and offered suggestions on the structure of the sessions.

The Design

This project is designed to challenge preachers to proclaim the gospel in such a way that it makes a difference in the lives of "hurting women." Because biblical interpretation has too often contributed to and provided the justification for the marginalization and oppression of African American women, it is important for the Black Church to establish a theoretical framework for biblical interpretation that demands and safeguards an egalitarian biblical hermeneutic. If the gospel is to be authentic and liberating in the lives of all marginalized and broken women, African American preachers, must abandon patriarchal, androcentric interpretations of scripture, and implement a womanist hermeneutic of liberation that speaks to Black women's realities and provides healing for their "hurting places."

In order to provide this model-in-ministry, the theological and theoretical framework of womanist interpretation of scripture and womanist preaching were explored and expanded. From the information gained, interpretive methodologies that yield a womanist hermeneutic of healing have been proposed. The theoretical conclusions

and the proposed hermeneutical and homiletical techniques have been further informed and shaped by the sermon evaluations completed by the context associates.

The design of this project was laid to have women listen to sermons and respond to those sermons using The Sermon Evaluation Form (Appendix C) in order to ascertain the effectiveness of "healing sermons." There was a pre-test (Appendix B) and a post-test (Appendix D) to measure personal growth as a result of the process.

It was agreed that the pastor and the two assistant pastors would use a "womanist hermeneutic of healing" in their preaching over the period of one year, and the women would then evaluate those sermons that ministered to their individual pain. The women were given numerous evaluation forms, and were told to complete them as they were impressed to do so. When there were sermons that were particularly appropriate for this project, they were notified in advance or given the audio tape subsequently.

A vital part of this design was the frequent meeting of the context associates. An initial meeting was held to introduce the project, and once the process began, six sessions were conducted to hear the thinking about the project and further to measure the emotional and spiritual growth of the group.

The design called for the evaluation forms to be collected as they were completed, so that the participants

would not be responsible for keeping up with forms for a length of time. One person was asked to serve as an unofficial coordinator for the group. Her responsibilities were to remind participants of meetings dates, assist in the collection of Sermon Evaluation Forms, and disseminate information to those women who missed sessions.

The Sessions Design

The sermon-listening experience was critical for this project. The primary focus of the women during every sermonic event was to listen for, define and respond to the interpretative methodologies of the preacher. Their approach to the process was based on their experiences and theological reflections. Their goal was to make the connections between the sermons and the most painful places in their lives. The reflections of the participants centered in their appropriation of and identification with biblical characters and scriptures, and the significance of the sermonic experiences with those personalities and scriptures to their healing. They were challenged to acknowledge if and how sermons participated in the elimination of their depression, low self-esteem, anger, confusion, etc, and if and how sermons moved them to more positive human experiences.

Sessions were designed to give the women an opportunity to discuss the sermons, share experiences past and present,

confront emotions and articulate spiritual and emotional growth. The format of the sessions would be informal group discussion. No designated time was set for sessions, but they were scheduled around the availability of everyone concerned. The first session was scheduled without input of the participants, but thereafter subsequent meeting dates were determined at the end of each session. The design called for six two-hour sessions, beyond the first meeting (which was an information session). There would be no teachings, no presentations, no agenda. After an opening prayer and scripture reading, the lead question was "And what healing sermons have you heard lately?" and the discussion would ensue.

The Evaluation Instruments Design

The Initial Questionnaire or Pre-test

There were three evaluative instruments used for this project: the pre-test or "Initial Questionnaire," "The Sermon Evaluation Form," and the post-test or "Final Evaluation." (See appendixes B, C, and D.) The basic format of all three of the instruments is the open-ended question. The belief was that the information needed would best be gained by allowing the participants the opportunity for candid and individual expression.

The Initial Questionnaire was designed to promote

honest reflection and self-disclosure and to ascertain the spiritual and emotional places of the participants as they came into the process. The five questions in the first part of the instrument contains demographic information-- code name, age, marital status, gender and ages of children, gender and ages of step-children. The questionnaire asked for a code name or number to insure anonymity and to observe if a code name would reveal any level of self-perception. (E.g., The code name "Leah" might indicate that a woman felt unloved by her husband.) The question about step-children was specifically asked because oft times step-children and the realities of second marriages/blended families engender their own kind of pain. The knowledge presented in the controlled variables of this section would give insight into the present situations of each participant.

Since one of the necessary ingredients for healing is acknowledgement of pain and recognition of the need for healing, Part II of this pre-test was structured to assist the women in confessing areas of brokenness. This section contains thirteen questions: two of which are a combination of an eight-point Likert scale and open-ended question. The remaining questions were open-ended questions. The first two questions of this section utilize the Likert scale:

1. If you are presently married, rate your satisfaction with the marriage.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
DISSATISFIED			SATISFIED			WELL-PLEASED	

2. If you are divorced or separated, how would you characterize the separation?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
NASTY				UNFRIENDLY			FRIENDLY

In the last question of this section -- I am a victim of -- the word "victim" was used intentionally. The aim was to determine whether or not the women would be comfortable with the term, or if they would replace the word victim with another word like "survivor." This was another attempt to gain insight into self-perception.

Part III was fashioned to gain insight into the participants' thinking about sermons and preachers. All of the questions in this section were open-ended. The goal of questions 1 and 3 was to discern each participants sermon-expectations. Did they expect the sermon to affirm them as women? Should the sermon speak to their experience and woundedness? Are they looking for more than a message of salvation and sanctification? Question 4 asked the women to comment on any differences they may have observed between male and female preachers. This question was used to determine if there was any prejudice for or against preachers who are female.

The Sermon Evaluation Form

The questions on the Sermon Evaluation Forms were constructed to motivate participants to reflect on a specified scripture and sermon. As they experience womanist interpretive methodologies that often reject traditional interpretations, and are affirming and liberating to women, this instrument was framed to help them see and articulate the differences and recognize the importance of the interpretive process. The hope was this process would awaken their awareness that preaching can address all aspects of oppression and brokenness, and to introduce them to the possibilities of healing through the liberating interpretation of scripture. Likewise, the questions were developed to assess the effectiveness of a particular sermon that reflects a womanist hermeneutic of healing.

This form contains ten questions. Part I records the controlled variables-- the preacher, the sermon title and the sermon scripture. Questions 1, 4, and 8 of the second section are a combination of a yes/no and the open-ended question. The remaining questions of this instrument are open-ended. The questions were formulated to: 1.) ascertain participants' prior experience(s) with sermonic and personal interpretation of the "selected" scripture; 2.) determine the impact of experiencing the scripture from the perspective of a hermeneutic of healing; and 3.) allow for

a comparison of the previous interpretation and the most recent one.

The Final Evaluation Form or Post-Test

The third instrument, "The Final Evaluation Form," was designed to measure the overall effectiveness of "preaching healing to hurting women." While the questions in this evaluative tool are not identical to the pre-test or Initial Questionnaire, they seek to note the spiritual and emotional healing that this process provided. Over the past year, the contextual associates were given opportunities to experience familiar scripture anew, and to appropriate the non-traditional readings to receive the healing and liberation contained therein. The final questionnaire, then, was designed to effect an honest and constructive "self-inventory" that would reveal growth, changes in thinking and behavior, and an awareness of possibilities of new biblical perspectives.

Questions 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 11 are a combination yes/no and open-ended question. The third entry on this form contains an eight point Likert scale. The participants are asked to rate how they see themselves at present:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
VICTIM			SURVIVOR			OVERCOMER	

The second part of the question contains an open-ended question that asks for an explanation of the Likert-

response. The remaining questions are solely open-ended.

The table below shows the correlating questions contained in the pre-test and the post-test

The Initial Questionnaire Question #	The Final Evaluation Question #
Pt.II/ 1, 2, 5, 6, 7	9, 10, 12
Pt.II/ 3, 4, 5, 6	4, 5
Pt.II/ 13	3
Pt.II/ 5, 11, 12	1, 2
Pt.III/ 1, 2, 3	6, 7, 8, 9, 10

The Model of Ministry Design

Responsibility and integrity demand that every preacher proclaim a gospel that is salvific and liberating to all peoples. This must certainly be the sermonic goal of those who preach to the African American community. With all of its imagination and prophetic insight, my experience has been that "black preaching" has traditionally been characterized by interpretive methodologies that demonstrate a commitment to the eradication of individual sin and the liberation of the black community from racism, social injustice and economic oppression. One missing hermeneutical element has been its sensitivity to the Black female experience. If anything, "Black preaching" and its traditional biblical interpretations have often robbed Black

women of their freedom and authentic personhood. In fact, many interpretations have accommodated and perpetuated African American women's oppression and woundedness.

Preaching in the African American Church must be grounded in a true hermeneutic of liberation, one that requires and effects the liberation of men and women. Womanist theology emerges as the theoretical paradigm that provides the theological framework and the interpretive principles that will deconstruct those androcentric, patriarchal texts that have traditionally oppressed African American women and men, as it employs a socio-historical reconstruction of the biblical text that sets free all of those who have been bound. This project seeks to challenge all who preach to African American women to utilize liberating interpretive methodologies that yield a womanist hermeneutic of healing.

The Model of Ministry for this project was designed to demonstrate to African American preachers, male and female, the need to "preach healing" to women of their community. In the Black Church, preaching can be one of the most influential currents in the worship setting. The preaching moment should empower the weak and discouraged, breakdown walls of bondage and move listeners to an authentic God-encounter. There is no moment in the worship experience more pregnant with a potential and challenge for increasing

faith, courage, strength and self-esteem.[2]

Those who are African American, female, and Christian undoubtedly, experience various degrees of collective and personal woundedness. Racial and gender discrimination, negative stereotyping, and social and religious oppression have touched all; mis-education, disappointment, sexual and physical abuse, addiction, physical and psychological abandonment, and troubled and oppressive relationships have been the lot of many. The over 4000 women at Allen represent a microcosm of the whole of African American Christian women. Therefore, when these women enter the sanctuary on Sunday mornings, they bring with them personal issues, problems, concerns, and needs. They have come to hear a gospel that provides the much needed message of hope, joy and wholeness. To encounter an insensitivity and hostility to the African American female experience would perpetrate a violence that is inexcusable and damaging.

In setting up the Model of Ministry for this project, it would have been impossible to use large numbers of women in the test group. In order to control the variables as much as possible, a smaller number was necessary. Ten women from the congregation of the Allen Church who have

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[2]See the work of Henry H. Mitchell and Emil M. Thomas, Preaching for Black Self-Esteem (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994). This book challenges African American preachers and church leaders to convey a gospel message that will imbue their people with ethnic pride, personal dignity, and self-affirmation.

experienced incest, rape, and physical and emotional abuse were selected to participate in this experiment. These particapants, along with three members of the pastoral staff who understood and embraced womanist perspectives, and the sermons that they preached, would become the relevant variables for this project. The preachers committed to employ womanist methodologies in their sermons, the participants agreed to make themselves available for listening to sermons preached by the three specified pastors.

As stated above, there are three preaching services per Sunday at Allen Church. Thus, there were numerous opportunities for the preachers to preach and the participants to hear that "Word" which transforms, liberates and heals, and permits women to find themselves and their experiences in the biblical text. Providing the ten hurting women several opportunities to experience preaching that grows out of exegesis and interpretive methodologies that are sensitive to their experiences was certainly one of the unique components of this project. The findings recorded on the evaluative instruments at the end of the process validate the necessity, the possibility and the obligation of constructing sermons that support African American women's liberation and wholeness.

The Implementation

The implementation of this project began with the development of a personal theological vision of the necessity of addressing the needs of women through sermon. Involvement in women's ministry has awakened my awareness of the ubiquitous pain in the African American female community, and has convinced me that those in ministry must use every opportunity afforded us to enter into the hurting places of the women that we encounter. The process began with the exploration of new strategies of non-traditional biblical interpretation that led to the formation of a hermeneutic of healing for African American women. Thus, there developed a commitment to the notion that biblical exegesis, while based in historicity, contextualization, and critical theological inquiry, is authentic only when the experiences of African American women are included in the process. The question that must always be primary to the exegetical process is "What is this text saying to African American women in particular?" The challenge of the process is to maintain an integrity that takes the homiletician from exegesis to a sermon that supports the transformation, healing and liberation of all people.

In addition, as commitment and information increased, I began to share the theories of "womanist preaching" with the pastor and assistant pastor of the Allen Church. As they began to understand the theoretical underpinnings of this

project, they readily concurred that this process would not only challenge us as the pastoral staff of the church, but it would also greatly benefit the wounded women of Allen Church. Time was also allotted at one of the meetings of the entire ministerial staff to present the challenges of preaching for female-healing and affirmation.

One of the pitfalls that had to be avoided as we committed to preaching healing to women was the exclusion of African American male experience from the process. Womanist theology requires exegesis that supports the liberation of the whole African American community; one group cannot be affirmed at the expense of another.

The second part of the implementation was the involvement of the test group. The women who participated were "hand-picked," based on prior knowledge of their experiences. Most of the women had sought pastoral counseling or had made some personal revelations at the women's bible study. (The congregation as a whole was never informed that this experiment was being conducted among a selected group of members.) Each of the women was contacted personally, and solicited to be a part of the group. Later a letter further explaining the project and announcing the first meeting date was hand delivered to each participant.

Each session was opened with prayer and selected scripture reading. Ten women participated in the group, but the average attendance at meetings was six. The initial

session (which took place in January, 1995) and the six that followed were two to three hours in length. The initial meeting, held in the library of the Allen Church, was probably the most formal. Not knowing what to expect, the women were somewhat reticent, but obviously committed to the process. Though they had received letters giving details about the project and outlining the role that they would play as the contextual associates, they would not be completely comfortable until further explanation and group dialogue had pierced their walls of restraint.

The introductions were brief and informative, but not particularly revealing. The women were familiar with each other, some more than others. Some were already friends, and had supported each other in their pain, but generally the group's prior knowledge of each other was cursory. The initial exchanges were congenial, but it was apparent that in this new situation the trust factor was low. So when the introductions ended, the first order of business was to establish that confidentiality would be imperative for the group. It was also made clear that none had to "tell their story," unless or until they were so inclined. As I talked more about the project, outlining the goals of and their roles in the process, their increased understanding led to greater comfort.

The "Initial Ouestionnaires" and "Sermon Evaluation Forms" were distributed, with virtually no instructions

egarding the completion of the forms. The main request was for honest reflection, openness and detailed answers. (The same forms were later hand delivered to the women who indicated that they could not be at the first meeting.) All were asked to return the "Initial Questionnaires" in two weeks if possible, and no later than the next meeting which we scheduled for the next month. The women were given two dates and times of scheduled sermons that they should make an effort to hear, and were told if they could not be there, tapes of the sermon would be made available. They were also encouraged, after reviewing the Sermon Evaluation Forms, to not only respond to pastoral sermons, but to any sermons preached at Allen Church that might fit the rubric of "healing sermons." The suggested settings were the Allen Women's retreat that was coming up in March, and the Monday night women's services that would continue until the end of April. After all questions were answered, the meeting ended with a closing prayer.

The six bi-monthly sessions that followed over the next year were held either in the library of the Allen Church or around the dining room table at my home. By the time the group came together for the first "sermon-evaluation-session," the initial questionnaires had been completed. The questionnaires had facilitated a great deal of thought and soul searching, and the women shared that having to write the responses helped put their past and present realities in

perspective. Many reported that as they were writing they wept, experienced pangs of anger or sadness, and had to confess feelings and wounds of which they thought they had been healed. The questionnaire experience had primed them for open discussion and self-disclosure. The women talked openly and honestly about their areas of pain and emotional states of being. The discussions also included responses to sermon content, and they easily talked about those sermons that ministered to their hurting emotions.

In general, the first session and the subsequent ones were reflective and insightful. The women connected, and were eager to talk and listen. With each session, they became more relaxed and talked easily about themselves and the sermons they had heard. The original intent was that the format of the sessions would be "discussion group," however, after a while they took on the aura of a "support group." They exposed, they cried, they comforted, and they encouraged, but they never lost sight of the task. Informal theological reflection and the sermon evaluation/self-evaluation process was consistently operative.

Upon the completion of this experience, context participants have acquired new skills and techniques for reading and interpreting scripture, for identifying the liberating and healing aspects of scripture, and for "finding themselves" in the biblical text. Moreover, they have moved closer to healing and authentic existence.

CHAPTER FIVE

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF THE MODEL

The Pre-test/The Initial Questionnaire

Part I

The ten women involved in the test group for this project represent a cross-section of the female members of the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church. When this project began, ages ranged from twenty-six years to fifty-nine years. Of the ten, four were single, four were married, one was married/separated, one was divorced. (Since this project began, one of the single women has married.) Four of the women had children, one had step-children, and one was pregnant wit her first child. There was nothing in the responses to indicate that the children and step-children contributed to the pain of the participants. When asked for a code name or number, only one person used a code name, the others chose to use their full, correct names, and used their names throughout the process. Table 1 records the control variables of the test group.

Table 1--Demographics of the test group .

Participant #	Age	Marital Status	# Children
1	26	Single	0
2	26	Single	0
3	28	Single (engaged)	0
4	29	Single	0
5	30	Married	0 *
6	32	Married	2
7	37	Divorced	3
8	39	Married/Separated	3
9	42	Married	2 **
10	59	Married (2nd)	4

* pregnant
** stepchildren

Part II

Of the five married women (including the married/separated), two indicated that they were dissatisfied with their relationship, while three circled numbers that indicated that they were well-pleased. The only divorced participant circled the number 4 on the Likert scale, indicating that her divorce was nasty to unfriendly. The separated respondent circled the number 7, describing her separation as more unfriendly than friendly. The responses for question 3 -- What things in your life would you do differently?-- were varied, and most answers had more than one part. At least four indicated that they would have begun a God-relationship/church involvement earlier. Other responses indicated that the women would change: marital circumstances; educational status; financial investments; and preoccupation with public perception. One person did not respond to this question.

When asked to list the things they liked about themselves in question 4, most saw themselves as lovers of people, peace and harmony. One appreciated her inner-strength and another was grateful for her spirituality. Conversely, when asked what they disliked about themselves in question 5, the responses included: too analytical, too sensitive, too pessimistic. Others confessed that they were guilty of low self-esteem, self-inflicted pain and insecurity.

If given the opportunity to change something about themselves (Question 6), several would purge themselves of insecurity, self-condemnation, and low self-esteem. Impatience, faithlessness, and no self-control were also traits that presented problems for the women. In question 9, they disclosed their "secret selves." There were admissions of insecurity, loneliness, guilt, shame and self-consciousness. There were two confessions of fear of emotional commitments, and one a life-long craving of her mother's love.

In the answers to questions 8 and 9, each participant identified those persons who had hurt them most and those who had helped them most. Table 2 shows the responses.

Question 10 had almost a unanimous response. While answers were phrased differently, the essence of the answers was the same. If given an opportunity to make inquiry to God, the most common question (in essence) would be: Why

have I had (do I have) so much pain in my life? The specified kinds of pain included rape, incest, unanswered prayer, agoraphobia, and family relationships.

Table 2 -- Responses of Participants re: persons who hurt them most and those who helped them most.

Participant #	Hurt	Helped
1	spouse (non-communicative)	mother
2	first husband (adultery, abuse)	present spouse
3	father, rapist, ex-boyfriend	mother, grandmother
4	ex-boyfriend (drug addict, unfaithful)	husband
5	mother (silence during father's incest)	fiance
6	husband (adultery); mother (controlling)	clergy
7	mother(abusive)	friend
8	mother, stepfather, uncle (molester)	grandparents
9	sisters (did not believe her re: incest)	husband
10	molester (date rape)	N/A

Note: Information in parentheses tells the source of the pain. N/A indicates that response is not available. The numbers of the participants were randomly assigned and do not follow the order of table one. (i.e. Participant #1 in Table 1 is not necessarily Participant #1 in Table 2.) Also in the table that follows, the information is also randomly ordered. This random ordering helps to insure anonymity.

One observation that was made from this questionnaire was that the women of the test group cry many tears. Their responses to questions 11 and 12 indicated that they cry in joy and sorrow. The most interesting response to the question "What has made you cry lately?", was: "Completing this questionnaire." Other things that have made them cry are the birth of children, painful memories, the knowledge of salvation and the genocide of African Americans. One

said she cries about "everything," and there were no responses from two of the respondents. When asked about the contexts in which they weep, the participants indicated they cry in prayer, church, private quarters, in the mirror and in bed. One responded "Everywhere."

The last question/statement of Part II, ("I am a victim of....") is, in essence, a summation of the entire section. The word "victim" was an intentional choice. While "survivor" or "overcomer" is a more acceptable term, the intent was to ascertain self-perception. Only one respondent crossed out the word "am" and substituted "was." Another accepted the word "victim," but wrote in parenthesis "will be an overcomer--one day." Table 3 reflects the individual responses of the test group.

Table 3 -- Responses of participants re: victimization.

Participant #	"I am a victim of...."
1	sexual & emotional assault; criminal justice system (dropped charges against her assailant)
2	(was) physical abuse, fear, anxiety
3	a co-dependent relationship
4	incest, mother's silence, self-condemnation
5	verbal, physical and mental abuse; abortion
6	rape and racism
7	physical and sexual abuse
8	incest
9	date rape
10	no answer

Part III

This part of the survey gave insight into the test group's thinking about preaching and preachers. The responses to the first two of these four open-ended questions point out the similarity in thinking of the participants about sermonic content and female preachers. Question one of this section asks: " What do you listen for when you hear a sermon?" The common consensus was "personal relevance." The women desire sermons that speak to their lives, experiences and needs. In addition, one woman alluded to the need for "personal testimony" in sermon, stating that when the preacher shares some of his or her journey, it provides some encouragement.

It should be noted that the Allen Church, in spite of having a male pastor and executive assistant pastor, provides wide exposure to female ministers. There is one female assistant pastor and twelve additional females on the ministerial staff. There are also nine licensed female evangelists, and an additional five women have preached initial sermons and are in the ministerial institute of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. These women are in the preaching rotation for Sunday morning worship and all other church events. In addition, the Allen Church has a period of Women's Emphasis during the months of January through April. During this time, there are usually three prayer breakfasts, one retreat, one revival, and weekly Monday

night worship, all of which give exposure to female preachers. Thus, the answers to Question two were based on broad exposure to male and female preachers alike.

When asked to denote any differences that they have observed between male and female preachers, all but one expressed a notable difference. The findings confirm that for the respondents, female preachers speak more to the female experience. Additionally, one commented on the tendency of females to engage in meaningful self-disclosure, while two added that women also have a tendency to dissect and contemporize scripture more than men. (Note: Question two was not designed to malign males or celebrate females in ministry. The intent was simply to give opportunity to the test group to comment on their observations.)

The last two questions of this section yielded responses that further penetrated the issue of meaningful sermon experiences. When asked to talk about the sermon that impacted them most, the women gave a plethora of sermon titles, descriptions and names of preachers. Some women only talked about one experience, while others recounted several. Preachers named were both male and female and the context was at Allen Church as well as other churches. While the responses could not be quantified, the descriptions offered in Question three, made it clear that the respondents' most memorable sermons spoke to their hearts and experience.

Listed below are five of the responses that the women offered.

1. "This Situation Looks Mighty Bad" (no scripture reference given). The Reverend Evelyn Horne of Ebenezer A.M.E. Church, Ft. Washington Maryland was preacher. After just having been raped, this message of hope encouraged this participant to know that with faith and patience, peace would ultimately be restored to her life.

2. "Waiting to Exhale" (John 8:1-11) -- The Reverend Elaine McCollins Flake, Allen A.M.E. Church, Jamaica New York. Three members of the test group listed this sermon. Using the story of the "woman caught in adultery," this sermon reminded the listeners that no matter how "powerless" one feels as they face life's most difficult situations, they can "breathe easy" in the assurance that Jesus will deliver them from oppression and bondage.

3. "The Woman Nobody Knows" (no scripture given) -- The Reverend Claudette Anderson Copeland at the Allen Women's Retreat. This message convinced this participant to begin the search for the woman that existed somewhere inside of her-- the woman who was confident, free of guilt, and healed of her pain.

4. "The Many Faces of David" (no scripture cited) -- Bishop J. Haskell Mayo preaching at the Bridge Street A.M.E. Church, Brooklyn, New York. Hearing the story of David's success as a king, but failure as a father helped the

respondent confront her feelings about her own father. This sermon helped her to begin to forgive her dad, as she began to move past some of her own pain.

5. "Soul Master" (no scripture cited) -- The Reverend Floyd H. Flake, Allen A.M.E. Church. This message gave this woman the courage to have hope in the wake of a "hopeless situation."

The Post-test/ Final Evaluation Form

This tool was designed to evaluate the results to this project. From the information above, the reader will note that some of the women had experienced some healing through sermon before this process began, but the hope was that all would come to new levels of growth and healing as they regularly encountered sermons that were designed for their healing.

The first question of this instrument asks the respondent to comment on how their painful experiences have impacted their lives negatively. It is obvious that this question has essentially been asked in the initial questionnaire. The intent was to see if and how the answers differed. (Since all of the members of the test group used their actual names on all forms, it was easy to compare the responses of the pre-test with the post-test.) An analysis of the answers of Question 1 produced the following observations. As many of the women discussed the negative

impact of their pain on their lives they spoke in the past tense, using phrases like "I feared," I did not know ," and "I had." This suggests that the negative feelings are at least "passing over."

When asked in Question 2 if they saw that any good has come out of their painful experiences, all but one respondent answered "yes." The thinking was that they are "stronger" because of the pain, and one stated that sharing her experience with others has allowed her to help others know that they can overcome their challenges. Even the participant who answered "no" admitted that her hope was that one day she could help someone else realize that it is possible to overcome. Another interesting observation was that two of the women, for a long time, had not been aware of their woundedness.

Question 3 used the eight-point Likert scale to allow the women to relate how they see themselves at present.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Victim				Survivor			Overcomer

All of the respondents indicated that they feel like they have moved past being just a survivor and are well on the road to becoming an "overcomer."

Unanimously, the women of the test group said, "Yes," over the past year, their perception of themselves has changed and for the better. When asked to explain, they

shared that they were feeling more confident, more "guiltless," stronger and more deserving of happiness. There were also professions of a greater sense of God-presence. This question was of significance to this project because improved self-perception is certainly one of the signs of being healed.

Question 5 was the pivotal question for this entire process. The hope was that when asked to what the changes could be attributed, there would be some indication that the "healing sermon" had been a contributor. The most unexpected finding was that, while the women confessed or implied the importance of sermon, some also mentioned that participation in this project has been instrumental to their healing.

Table 4 -- Likert scale responses to question 3.

Participant #	Number circled on Likert scale and reason
1	6 (more confident)
2	7 (no more guilt; can face those who hurt her)
3	7 (feels more comfortable with self)
4	6 (confessed the pain & confronted the demons)
5	7 (more self-attuned; not trying to please others)
6	7 (will not allow past to victimize her any longer)
7	6 (using the pain of the past to be empowered for future; has learned to take control of life)
8	7 (no explanation)
9	7 (in spite of wounds, has become good mother)
10	did not return form

Question 7 is a direct response to question 5. It asks about specific sermons that have ministered healing. Listed below are the individual responses.

Even though 80% of the sermons listed above were preached by women, the fact that the sermons of men were listed demonstrates that a womanist hermeneutic of healing is one that can be employed by men and women alike. Womanist preaching is defined by gender: it is any sermonic articulation that is sensitive and committed to Black women, Black men and Black children. Black men can be a womanist preacher. Likewise, every Black female preacher is not necessarily a "womanist preacher."

Completing the "Sermon Evaluation Forms" and being in the project sessions would obviously influence the way the participants listen to sermon. Question 6 instructs them to tell how. The responses revealed: 1.) they are now more focused, 2.) they look for that Word from God that is healing, 3.) they are more introspective and 4.) they want a sermon that inspires a change in attitude and behavior.

As stated earlier, womanist preaching, if it is anything, is corrective. It should motivate and inspire positive modification of thinking and behavior. Thus, one of the ways in which the success of womanist preaching is measured is through the determination of altered actions and attitude. Question 9 asks if the sermons listed in question 7 have challenged or motivated a change. All said "yes." The explanations gave insight into the changes.

Table 5-- Sermons and preachers that respondents listed as having been healing sermons.

Participant #	Sermon Titles	Preacher
1	God Did Me A Favor	Carolyn Showell
	We Must Go On	Elaine M. Flake
	The Situation Looks Mighty Bad	Evelyn Horne
2	Stretch Forth Your Hand	Elaine M. Flake
	"Necessary Losses"	Elaine M. Flake
	Conversation With a Half Dead Man	Claudette Copeland
	I've Been Trying to Cry All My Life	Dwayne Belin
3	Change Your Behavior	Jackie McCollough
	Stretch Forth Your Hand	Elaine M. Flake
	" Hurt People Hurt People"	Elaine M. Flake
	Waiting to Exhale"	Elaine M. Flake
	I've Been Trying to Cry All My Life	Dwayne Belin
	In God's Presence There Is Fullness of Joy	Iona Locke
4	"Hurt People Hurt People"	Elaine M. Flake
	A Misunderstood Woman	Elaine M. Flake
	"Necessary Losses"	Elaine M. Flake
	I've Been Trying to Cry All My Life	Dwayne Belin
	A Healing At The Pool	Cynthia James
5	The Tragedy of Not Being Healed	Shirley Graham
	Just Another Challenge	Floyd H. Flake
6	"Necessary Losses"	Elaine M. Flake
	"Who Told You That You Were Naked?"	Renita J. Weems
7	Not For Sale	Philip R. Cousins
8	The Bent Over Woman	Jackie McCollough
	"Dancing With Broken Bones"	Elaine M. Flake
	"What Kind of Love Are You Looking For?"	James Forbes
	Name That Pain	Claudette Copeland
9	Hurt People Hurt People	Elaine M. Flake
	"Who Told You That You Were Naked?"	Renita J. Weems
	"Living in the State of Stuck"	Dwayne Belin
10	did not return form	

Note: Some of these sermons were preached before the project began in January, 1994.

According to the responses to Question 11, all have come to think differently about God over the past year. The collective new God-perception is that God desires and provides healing and restoration for all. Knowing that " God desires my healing" has been a source of empowerment for those women whose pain had caused them to question the love of God. For one of the respondents, the question --"Why did

Table 6-- Charts the altered attitude and behavior of the test group over the last year.

Participant #	Noted change
1	No longer shuts down upon negative criticism self-condemnation has ceased
2	No longer in denial; Seeking professional help. no longer beats self up
3	An increased faith in God and self
4	Not inclined to give up so easily; new faith in God
5	More committed to study of scripture; no depression
6	New determination to obey God; no more compromises
7	More committed to working through weaknesses; Will not be afraid to deal with truth
8	More confident; more faith in God
9	More confident; increased faith in God

Note: The answers to question ten were more or less a reiteration of those in question nine and are reflected in Table 6.

God allow this to happen to me?"-- still remains. However, in the midst of this question (and even her anger with God), she is at a new level of intimacy with God.

The last question of this instrument asked the members of this group to state their attitudinal and behavioral goals for the coming year. The desire to continue to improve and receive God's healing was expressed consistently. One woman hoped to start the business that she has never had the confidence to start. Others resolved to continue in the healing process that has begun, to build themselves up in the faith and to employ a reading of scripture that will bring them closer to God and personal liberation.

The Evaluation

The issue of pain is such a personal and individual one, that open-ended questions seemed like the most desirable structure for the evaluation instrument. By allowing the women to express themselves freely, a great deal of valuable information was acquired. The problem, however, is that it is difficult to quantify the open-ended responses of ten women. Another problem with the data collected from the open-ended question is that there were instances of "not really answering the question," or incomplete answers. Of course, there were responses which were extremely verbose and tangential, and it soon became

apparent that for some this pre-test/post-test process became almost therapeutic.

An analysis of the pre-test/post-test results indicates that this project was beneficial for the women who were context associates. Comparing their pre-test/post-test answers, there is evidence of positive changes in attitude and behavior. It was observed that one of the members of the study group had a unique pattern of change. A "victim" of incest, she had been in denial and never really confessed her pain. With her confession, came anger, depression and doubt. This year has been a time of "working through her stuff," and as a result of this process, she had moved closer to authentic healing. Healing sermons have ministered to her woundedness in part, and she has entered therapy to further advance the process.

Listening to gospel messages which come under the rubric of "healing sermons" has exposed the women to a non-traditional interpretation of scripture that has taught them that the bible does speak to their experiences as African American women. This knowledge has given them permission to see themselves in the biblical text, and the session discussions have revealed that the women have begun to see and interpret scripture differently.

The membership of the Allen Church was never apprised of this project, and though they were not directly involved, they experienced the same sermons that the context

associates experienced. The responses of the numerous women and men in the congregation have affirmed the spiritual and emotional gains that come with preaching healing to hurting women. The positive results of this study, coupled with the positive comments of other members of the congregation, would lead to the conclusion that is a model for ministry that is not only replicable but indispensable.

The sessions were designed to expedite the sermon evaluation process. The intent was to use them to give the context associates a chance to explore the interpretive methodologies implemented in sermon and to relate how those methodologies had spoken to them in particular. This was certainly accomplished. There was, however, an unplanned variable that evolved. The sessions developed a "support group" dynamic. By the third session, the emotional needs of the women dictated that the sessions design was altered, as the women moved from sermon evaluation to dialogue that revealed their hurt, anger and guilt. Their comfort with the process and the context had increased to the point that they were willing to expose their wounds. The fifth session became so emotion-filled that tears, hugs and words of comfort charged the room.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The victimization of African American women by racial, gender, and class oppression is an indisputable reality. Historical and contemporary analyses reveal that for those women who are Christian and of African descent, this oppression, past and present, is rooted in the social and religious hierarchial social structures that have grown out of patriarchal and androcentric perspectives. The pain and suffering that grows out of that victimization is distinctive, and requires biblical interpretation that resists oppression, marginalization and dehumanization on any level and of any segment of humanity. The focus of this project has been to demonstrate and emphasize to preachers who preach to African American Christian women the importance of biblical exegesis and hermeneutical interpretation that are sensitive to every aspect of Black women's experience. Preaching that is embedded in womanist interpretation of scripture and a womanist hermeneutic of healing is offered as a tool that will acknowledge and validate that experience, and effect healing for the wounds and pain that are the result of that experience. The homiletical goal of all responsible exegetes ought be to

liberate African American Christian women by liberating the Bible from the prisons of interpretations grounded in Eurocentric/androcentric philosophies. The result of such liberation will manifest in the form of preaching that heals hurting women.

The findings of this study certainly indicate the importance of preaching in the lives of African American church-women. The responses of the test group confirm that women tend to listen to sermons out of their own experiences, and are strengthened and affirmed most when the preacher employs strategies and interpretations that allow them to appropriate biblical stories and principles, and relate to them on personal levels. Likewise, the findings also define and substantiate the need for preaching that heals hurting women. "Healing sermons" were said to be a source of empowerment and a corrective of attitude and action.

Most of the sermons identified by the women in this study as "healing sermons" were preached by African American women. Womanist thinking and preaching doubtlessly demonstrates the Black female preachers' commitment to the spiritual and emotional health of their sisters. Having occupied the same race/gender places of oppression, having inhabited the same troubled realities, and having personal insight into both qualifies preaching African American women to penetrate the secret places of their female hearers.

However, womanist preaching must not be viewed as an exclusionary or exclusive methodology. Womanist preaching grows, not out of biology, but from ideology. Every Black female preacher will not preach sermons that are sensitive to the existential realities of Black women. Thus, the challenge for them is to read scripture anew, and discover a world of interpretive strategies that will empower all concerned. Likewise, many Black male preachers do and all should feel morally compelled to employ exegetical strategies that are sensitive to the experiences of the females in the congreation and preach sermons shaped by a womanist hermeneutic of healing.

While there were only ten women included in this study, it is believed that employment of this theory will have universal significance in the lives of African American women. Should preachers in the "Black Church" embrace the spirit of womanist thinking and preach sermons which reflect a hermeneutic of healing, the lives of African American women could be infinitely enriched and transformed. No longer can those who are called to the office of expanding the ministry of Jesus Christ be committed to a "traditional" exegesis that becomes the matrix of Black women's mental and emotional oppression and woundedness.

All of the women in this study were active church members and attended church services regularly. Their faith and historical God-relationship made them eager and willing

to receive healing through sermon and liberating biblical interpretation. This study might have been strengthened by the inclusion of women who were more "peripheral" members or who had an "uncertain" or short-lived God-relationships. The theory of "preaching healing to hurting women" could be tested further with the inclusion of women in prison, drug rehabilitation programs, or women's shelters, and who are essentially "unchurched."

One part of the evaluative process that proved to be somewhat problematic was the collection of the evaluative instruments. The participants were instructed to complete each of the forms at home, and to return them immediately. The thinking was that this would give sufficient time for reflection and well-written presentations. To have insisted that the forms be completed during the sessions might have made the participants feel "rushed," and their responses might have been less thoughtful and insightful. While this assumption was valid, and it was obvious that the women spent time with the forms, the collection of the evaluative instruments was often slow and tedious. "I am going to get that form to you this week" became the common response. Gathering the Final Evaluation Form was the most difficult, and several of the women had to be called several times before they submitted them. Though she participated in the entire process, submitting the "Initial Questionnaire" and several "Sermon Evaluation Forms," by the time this writing

was completed, one woman still had not submitted the Final Evaluation Form. Thus, for future studies, while it might be ineffective and impossible to have participants complete sermon evaluations during the sessions, consideration should be given to on-site completion of final evaluative instruments.

APPENDIX A

CANDIDACY REVIEW DOCUMENT

APPLICATION FOR CANDIDACY REVIEW

Name The Reverend Margarett Elaine McCollins Flake

Context in ministry Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church, Jamaica, NY

Mentor(s) Drs. Clarice Martin and William Myers

Phase I and II Papers submitted to Doctor of Ministry Office __x__Yes ____No

Working title for project: Preaching Healing To Hurting Women: A Womanist Homiletical and Hermeneutical Approach To Ministry To African American Women

Summary of model-in-ministry project:

This project will focus on "womanist preaching" as a praxiological response to womanist theology and womanist biblical hermeneutics. Since larger numbers of Church women can be reached during the preaching moment than in workshop or Bible study settings, I propose to define womanist hermeneutical and homiletical methodologies and show how they can and should be utilized to address the brokenness of Christian women of African ancestry. Additionally, the project will survey and evaluate the significance and effect of womanist preaching on "hurting women" in the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Summary of methodology for designing, implementing and evaluating the model-in-ministry project:

A group of 10 to 15 women from the Allen A.M.E. Church will be formulated to act as a test-group or proving-ground for the theological and pedagogical finding. They will receive initial questionnaires designed to reveal unresolved issues, areas of brokenness and levels of bondage, insecurity, fear, pain and unforgiveness. In the following months, these women will regularly respond to sermons that reflect a womanist interpretation of Scripture and then will complete sermon-evaluation/ self-evaluation forms for each sermon. At the end of the one year period, they will complete a final evaluation that will reveal personal healing and growth. The final questionnaires will also be designed to reveal any newly acquired techniques for listening to and evaluating sermons. A compilation of the survey responses will lead to the offering of suggestions for a "healing-through-sermon" model of ministry for African American women in the Church.

SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Born in Memphis, Tennessee, I grew up in a home in which two-thirds of the household (my mother and I) were church-going and Christian. My entire maternal family attended the St. Jude Missionary Baptist Church, and all of us were extremely active in Church organizations and activities. Within the church of my birth, there was always a strong emphasis on the "conversion" experience (which usually occurred on the "Mourners' Bench"), and most Black southern Baptists maintained that to be on the safe side, conversion should occur by 12 years of age, which they believed to be the "age of accountability." My mother, who was a teacher in the Memphis Public Schools, was completely committed to the notion of conversion and accountability, and decided that I was too precocious and "womanish" to wait until I was twelve. Thus, one April night when I was nine years of age, she dragged me off the annual revival service at our church, and escorted me to the Mourners' Bench so that I might be "converted." Because I had grown up in the Church, not only attending Sunday morning and evening worship services, but rarely missing Sunday School and Baptist Training Union, and because I had never

questioned any of what I had learned in either place, "conversion" came easy for me. My time on the "Mourners' Bench" was short, and that first night I accepted Jesus Christ as my "personal Savior," and joined the ranks of those who had been "born again."

The Baptists' commitment to the acts of conversion, water baptism (by immersion and the hands of a Baptist preacher), and regular celebration of the Lord's Supper grew out of a strict and fundamental biblical tradition. As a child, I do remember the pastor and other visiting ministers preaching extremely fiery, Spirit-filled sermons which admonished us all to renounce sin, be baptized and saved from eternal damnation. As much as I loved the music and though I sang in the Youth Choir until I left to go to college, it was the preaching moment that was usually the high-point of my Sunday worship experience. Very early I was fascinated by the phenomenon of "Black preaching." The energy, the rhythmic cadence, and the unique manifestations of the Holy Spirit made worship services exciting for me. In addition, I was intrigued by the "effect" that the preaching moment had on many of the members of the congregation. There was laughing, jumping, shouting and crying all over the place when the preached word came forth. The joy and comfort that resulted from the preaching of the Gospel was almost mystical. My mother would tell me that it was the "good preaching" that church folk got on Sunday that

kept them going the rest of the week. In spite of all that was bad in their lives, the Gospel and its soulful articulation through God's preacher (along with good singing) made the bad tolerable.

"Sin" was usually described as drinking, smoking, cursing, adultery, stealing, killing, and not loving your neighbor. Those, in particular, would send one straight to hell. To that list my grandmother added doing housework on Sunday and dressing indecently. It seems odd, but I have no memory of fornication and homosexuality being enumerated among the deadly sins, but I now would surmise that those two were too deadly to even mention. I do remember, however, young women who had given birth out of wedlock, being required to offer a public apology for their sinful act before they could be again received and "re-admitted" to the Church family. I often wondered how a church that preached love could so heartlessly humiliate someone they claimed to love. Even then, I knew that such a public display was the church's requirement and not God's. Who then was the biggest sinner, the girl or the church who humiliated her?

The Bible was generally taken literally in my religious tradition, but oft times there were some most "creative" interpretations of scripture with a convenient fundamental and misogynist thrust. I grew up thinking that the Bible clearly stated that women could not wear pants, had to have

their heads covered in church and could not play cards. Likewise, as children we could not go to the movies on Sunday, and dancing would assuredly send us to hell. Intellectual discourses about the soundness of Pauline doctrine, especially as it related to women, were never heard. Contextualization and historical analysis were two methodologies rarely utilized in our readings and interpretations of the biblical text. In fact, many a church business meeting was begun with the reading of I Corinthians 14: 34.... "Let your women keep silence in the church, for it is not permitted for them to speak...." And if women were discouraged from speaking in business meetings, it was certain that the notion of a female preacher was never entertained in my little church. I can remember by grandfather, who was a leading trustee in the church, declaring that God never intended for women to be preachers or deacons or trustees in God's Church. His belief in a male-lead church was grounded, of course, in the fact that Jesus never had female disciples.

Because of the way I was taught to read scripture, I never knew what it meant to question or dialogue with the biblical text. The Bible was the first and last word in my tradition, engaging the church on the level of "monologue." Too many questions went unasked and unanswered, and too many literal interpretations went unchallenged. Furthermore, many a spiritual phenomenon went unexplained. For example,

I was never taught to view the Holy Spirit as a gift from God, whose function was to teach, lead and "comfort" God's people. Rather, the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit was manifested and explained in my religious culture, was that divine power that seemingly "consumed" certain believers, making them jerk and scream uncontrollably, with many performing extreme physical feats. The sight of my grandfather's good friend flipping over pews, my best friend's grandmother running the aisles and knocking down all who got in her path, and my own grandmother violently stretching out her arms and screaming "Yes Lord! Yes Lord!" moved me to resolve that the Holy Spirit was the person in the Trinity that I feared with all of my heart and wanted no part of. There was no way that I wanted to experience the "Holy Ghost" as it was inflicted upon so many "unfortunate" believers.

In addition to my religious culture being void of "responsible" biblical interpretation, it was also lacking in political or social consciousness. Having abandoned the activism was rooted in their religious heritage, our local church leaders were either oblivious or hostile to the liberation spirit that was present in so many of their ministerial predecessors like Nat Turner or Denmark Veasy. It was not until the emergence of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., did I hear a call for justice and a cry of outrage from any pulpit. Even when only a few miles across the state-

line, a young Black teenager by the name of Emmit Till was brutally murdered by a group of Mississippi Whites, internal outrage was suppressed as Black preachers publicly admonished Black males to beware of being disrespectful of White women. We were an oppressed people, convinced that our liberation would come to us if we "stayed in our places," continued to serve God, and waited patiently for God to change the hearts of our White oppressors.

With all that might have been missing from my childhood church culture, I must not fail to acknowledge its contributions to my life and the shaping of my theology and biblical hermeneutic. The Church was probably the greatest single influence in my life outside my home. It was in the Church that I learned the skills of memorization and oratory. Easter speeches and Christmas productions gave me and many a Black child an opportunity to develop gifts that would have otherwise gone undiscovered. The opportunity to serve as secretary to the Sunday School and president of the children's choir fostered the self-confidence and leadership skills that affirmed us as individuals and assured us that we had every ingredient needed to succeed. Lastly, the St. Jude Baptist Church culture provided for me a real sense of "community". Because I grew up seeing high school teachers singing in the choir next to cooks from the school cafeteria, and doctors standing next to garbage collectors as they both served communion, I came to fully appreciate

the concept of church as a class-less institution. It was in the church that men and women were able to be somebody, regardless of education or profession. The poorest welfare mother could be the featured soloist for the Sunday morning service. The unlearned and unskilled janitor found glowing recognition and success as the Sunday Superintendent. The Church represented for the Black community the place where everybody could be somebody.

In addition, I learned to cherish the novelty and the importance of preaching in the Black Church. An understanding of the "need" for sound preaching and worship has made me faithful to the ideal of meaningful and relevant ministry. Because worshippers bring with them their various problems, concerns and expectations, and because most have come needing and hoping for a personal "Word" from the Lord, I am faithful to the charge that it is the responsibility of the preacher to effectively and diligently reveal the transforming and redemptive power of the gospel, using responsible exegesis and interpretation. The preacher, through his or her oneness with God, self and humanity, must bring that "liberating Word" which empowers and makes a difference in the lives of all who hear.

The belief that the Church was founded to be a liberating and enabling institution that ministers to the "whole" person, is one that evolved during my militant college years at Fisk University. Even though I chose not

to attend church while an undergraduate student, my love for God and the Black church was such that I could not reject the church totally, as many of my contemporaries did. However, the rhetoric and the liberation efforts of the 60's forced me to re-evaluate the relevance of the church and to make new demands on it. With a "theology of liberation" evolving in the academy and in the community, I began to listen to those Black preachers who envisioned the church as that entity which was called to be the divine impetus and mobilizer of the liberation process. In the late sixties, the writings of James Cone, Gayraud Gilmore and others, challenged the Black church to recognize the reality that God is a God of liberation and that Jesus is for the oppressed, the poor and the unwanted, and is against all oppressors. It became apparent to me that if the Black Church would experience an "authentic" existence, it had to abandon its state of inertia and irrelevance as it related to the liberation of Black folk and be in the forefront of that liberation process.

When I began looking for a meaningful church experience after I finished graduate school at Boston University, I joined the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cambridge, not because I had any real problem with the Baptist denomination, but because this particular church and its pastor happened to meet my "new" religious standards. The pastor was one of the "newbreed" preachers who had

accepted the challenge to do relevant and holistic ministry, and was committed to instituting a more pragmatic and functional role for the Church within the Black community. His biblical interpretation and preaching was centered in a hermeneutic of liberation, and my God-encounter in that place gave my life new spiritual dimension.

Though I had a strong Baptist indoctrination from my youth, the transition to the African Methodist Episcopal Church was easy for me. I had come to an understanding that denominational beliefs and traditions are insignificant and inconsequential, as long as the common thread of the Gospel is present and as long as a body of believers worships God in spirit and seeks to address the needs of its community of believers and nonbelievers. My primary interest and involvement continues to be centered around the ministry of my local church which happens to be A.M.E., but it is my belief that its membership in the Church-universal transcends any denominational affiliation. I have found, however, that my theology and belief in a "social gospel" are such that I have come to love and appreciate the "history" of my present denomination.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, having been born out of the evils of segregation and racial discrimination, is a denomination founded on sociological principal and theological difference. Formulating a theology and biblical hermeneutic that championed an

egalitarian praxis, the A.M.E. church, founded and led by Richard Allen, was one of the initial and most vocal voices in America that was raised in protest against the racism and segregationism of the White church and the larger society. Its motto-- GOD OUR FATHER, CHRIST OUR REDEEMER, MAN OUR BROTHER-- while sexist in its articulation and void of an acknowledgement of the reality of the Holy Spirit, grows out of the a belief in the liberating biblical tradition upon which the Christian Church was founded. With a militant and compassionate Jesus Christ as his example, Allen was a major proponent of freedom and self-help, and preached and practiced a social gospel that would enable Blacks to be leaders in education, business, property ownership and the liberation struggle.

My experiences at St. Paul Church provided an awakening to Biblical scholarship and "non-literal" interpretation. Upon the recommendation of my pastor, I purchased my first "study" Bible, Biblical commentary and non-King-James-translations (Living Bible, Good News, and Revised Standard) so that I might better "understand" scripture. My private Bible study and devotions were certainly enhanced by these initial purchases, and thereafter, I added regularly to my resource library. The next five years proved to be a time of intense study and spiritual development for me. The uncovering of the historical information given in various commentaries gave scripture new meaning, and it was not

"conflictual" or difficult for me to abandon many of the misconstrued teachings of my childhood. It was uniquely liberating for me when I discovered that Paul's teachings concerning women and their silence in the church was not directed to me.

It was in Cambridge that I first had the opportunity to experience a female preacher. Without hesitation or reservation, I knew when I first saw her that her presence in that pulpit was just as God had intended. Thorough "nonsexist" exegesis and a dynamic delivery combined to produce a sermon about the women at the tomb that was so stirring and penetrating that I cried for a week. Seeing a woman stand behind the pulpit, and hearing her preach was a most natural and affirming experience for me, and that experience might well have been the experience that changed the course of my life. The realization that women could be called and chosen just as men were called gave me a new perspective on myself, my potential in the life of the Church that I loved and on scriptural interpretation. I began to search for that special "word" for women that I knew was contained in scripture. I especially looked at the stories about women found in the Gospels with new interest. I consulted as many books and commentaries as I could find so that I could explore various interpretations of the stories, paying special attention to their most obvious and obscure themes in relation to the lives of Black

women.

I came to appreciate the Bible as God's gift to the Church which, along with prayer and the Holy Spirit, is a means by which God imparts God's self to God's people. I believe that those truths contained in God's Word should be studied and established in our souls, and become such a part of our lives that it is essential to our day to day existence. Moreover, the scriptures should be studied in relationship to history, context and spiritual intent, so that the community of believers can be fully liberated "into" the knowledge of God and God's purpose for us in the fulfillment of God's Kingdom.

Since I have begun preaching, one of my most challenging undertakings has been to explore the exegetical and hermeneutical writings of various biblical scholars and theologians, in light of my own liberation/womanist hermeneutic. The first question that I ask of any text is how it can be appropriated to the Black and/or female community. The first question that I pose for any scholar is whether his or her textual interpretation is sensitive to either audience. In general, Biblical scholarship is void of a liberation or womanist hermeneutic, thus the task for me is to either discard that material which is either hostile or inconsequential to a liberation or womanist interpretation of the text, or utilize that material that is significant for me and/or my audience.

My determination is to reveal to Black women and to African American people the voice of God as it is heard from the pages of the Biblical text: a voice that has special meaning just for them.

With all that the Black Church has given me, undeniably one of its greatest contributions to my life is my best friend and husband, Floyd. I never intended to marry a preacher or a divorced man because I was convinced that in both instances there would be too many inherent problems. But because he was my friend and confidant first, I was able to look beyond his profession and past, and see him as the astute, thoughtful person that he is. I had been a member of St. Paul for about a year when he joined the church family. Shortly thereafter, while at a Sunday night service, he introduced himself to me. After a two-year friendship, and a four-month courtship, we married on December 28, 1975. Two months later I was pregnant, six months later the Bishop gave my husband (and me) an appointment to the Allen A.M.E. Church in Jamaica New York, and we have been on the move ever since.

Eighteen years have passed and our most outstanding contributions to the church family are Aliya Mariama, Nailah Lorice, Robert Rasheed and Harold Hasan. Somewhere between the birth of the first and second child, I acknowledged "the call;" between the third and fourth child I started seminary; and after the fourth child, I accepted the call

and started the ordination process. I completed seminary and received my final ordination in May, 1993, and I still find it difficult to believe that my husband is married to a preacher.

I have often heard it said that a preacher will not be a "good" preacher until he or she has been through trial. I don't know if I am a good preacher, but if that theory is correct, I should be. Our time of trial came in 1991, when the United States Justice Department, after three years of hounding and relentless investigation, indicted us for tax evasion, stealing church funds, etc. My husband's election to the United States Congress in 1986 had generated a lot of publicity and hostility because his campaign had been "grass-roots" and he ran against the "machine." A lot of people were out to get him, and they almost got him, and me too.

During this ordeal, my primary concern was for my children and my church family. Fortunately, the children did not perceive my quiet hysteria and feelings of being abandoned by God; they took their cues from their father, and believed that the worst would soon be over. The miracle, however, was the response of the congregation and the Jamaica community. In the midst of accusations and allegations, the people remained faithful. Attendance did not wane, offerings increased, and the spiritual and financial support was overwhelming. I can truly say that

after a four-week trial and the ultimate dismissal of the case, I came out of that experience thanking God. I was truly ashamed of my own faithlessness, and was absolutely convinced that the Allen Church family was indeed the greatest in all of Christendom.

CONTEXT IN MINISTRY

I truly believe that our 17-year tenure at Allen has been a divinely ordered one. The Allen Church membership has grown from 1400 to over 6000 and our annual budget of tithes and offerings has increased from $250,000 to $3.6 million dollars. Three morning Worship services are held each Sunday (6:30 a.m., 8:30 a.m. and 11:15 a.m.) in the 1200-seat Allen School gymnatorium (we outgrew the sanctuary of the church over 5 years ago), and because this facility is now too small, funds are now being raised for a new 2500-seat church building. In addition, over a year ago, we started a youth church, which is held in the main sanctuary of the church. On any given Sunday we can count almost 500 young people singing in the choirs, playing in the band and serving as stewards, trustees and stewardesses.

Our belief is that God has called our church not only to minister to the spiritual needs of it congregants, but to also raise the consciousness and the appearance of its community. In an attempt to carry out this bidding, we have purchased and renovated a great deal of deteriorating commercial and residential property in the immediate area. Community development has provided stability in a neighborhood that was becoming unattractive and abandoned.

The changed aesthetics has not only resulted in increased property values, but has also brought new businesses and jobs to the area.

Studies have shown that Jamaica, New York is probably the largest middle class Black community in the country. It is the only Black community in the N.Y.C. area that has comparable income per capita as other non-minority areas in New York City. The Adesleigh Park section of Jamaica, in which Allen is located, is the past home of many of the African American "greats." Older members of the community take great pride in pointing out the former homes of Lena Horne, Jackie Robinson, James Brown, Count Basie, Roy Campanella, Brook Benton and others, and often refer to the time when Jamaica was in its "heyday." The informal historians in the area tell us that it was a self-contained community which offered it inhabitants everything they needed, making it possible for them to never to have to leave the area to shop. The homes in Adesleigh Park are old and well-kept, and there is an ardent desire on the part of its inhabitants to preserve its "heritage." With the newly-built Federal Building and York College only a few blocks away, and with the renovations and new buildings that Allen Church has contributed to the community, property value in this area has, in a declining market, maintained in the last few years. Even outside Adesleigh Park, in communities like Springfield Gardens, Cambria Heights, Laurelton, Rosedale,

and Queens Village, there continues to be a feeling that Jamaica is a valuable community of single-family dwellings that offers the most "suburban" atmosphere of the five boroughs.

The Jamaica community is largely comprised of African Americans, most of whom own and/or live in single family dwellings. In addition, there is a large coop-complex (Rochdale Village) which houses approximately 10,000 people. There are also two large public housing complexes. Though many view Jamaica as a dying community, we see it as a community of promise and potential. Our congregation of over 6000 members is reflective of the general population of the community-- a large number of transplanted southerners and Caribbeans, and very few native New Yorkers. The people are essentially hard-working and proud citizens. During Allen Church's involvement in various building programs and property acquisitions, not only have we had the full support of the congregants, several monetary contributions have come from people of the community who appreciate the ministries of the church.

While studies show that the city of New York, as a whole, lost jobs in the last few years, Queens has gained jobs. The Jamaica area, where Allen Church is located, has been designated as an Economic Development Zone, which has a commitment from 110 companies to invest in the provision of new jobs. Allen Church, through seven subsidiary

corporations, has provided over 742 jobs and a budget of $13 million, making it one of the largest employers in the county. (The largest employers in the area are New York City's two airports, LaGuardia and Kennedy.) Queens also has the largest senior citizen population in N.Y.C. (408,070 over the age of 60). Because the Jamaica community reflects this population and housing for Seniors was a problem, Allen Church was instrumental in the building of a 300-unit Senior Citizen Complex (one of the largest in the country) a few blocks from the church, and also sponsors a city-run feeding program for seniors.

When we first came to the Jamaica community in 1976, with the exception of a Seven-Day Adventist school and a Catholic School, there were no parochial schools. Because my husband and I have believed that the Black church ought to be about the business of educating its own children, he shared his vision of a Christian School with the members of the church and they were more than receptive. A building program was immediately instituted, an education committee was formulated, and in January of 1983, I was asked to serve as coordinator of the soon-to-be-established Allen Christian School. We modestly projected an initial enrollment of 75 students, but because we obviously underestimated the community's desire for an Afrocentric-Christocentric education for their children, our projections were much too low. We opened that September with 237 students, Pre-

Kindergarten to third grade; the next year, grades four, five and six were added and in the next two years we added seventh and eighth grades. Since our opening, our education-ministry has been one of the church's most effective community outreach ministries. Over 80% of our students, past and present, have not been members of our church, and a large percentage were not members of any church. However, after their association with the school, several of those "un-churched" parents and children have become members of Allen after coming to the school.

The school, housed in a $3.8 million dollar facility, with over twenty classrooms, a cafeteria, and gymnatorium, was erected by the Allen A.M.E. Church in 1983. The overall expenses of the school, coupled with the $20,000.00-per-month-mortgage are a financial challenge. The most significant task for the administrative staff, the church pastor and the board of directors is to pay the bills, while keeping the tuition as low as possible. Most years, income is lower than expenses, so the Church must subsidize. Of course, our teachers' salaries are not commensurate with the salaries of teachers in public schools, but in spite of budgetary problems, we have an excellent school and some of the best teachers in the city.

From the time that I arrived at Allen I became involved with the ministry to women in the church, and the past fifteen years have afforded me the opportunity to work with

women who are both responsive and agreeable. About 70% percent of the congregation is female, most between the ages of 35-60, but there are a large number of women in the 25-35 age range who are involved in the various women's ministries. I have been committed to providing programs that are appealing and beneficial to women of all ages, married and single. The Women's Ministry Department has sponsored workshops, annual retreats, and two women's conferences, one in 1983 and the last one in March of 1993. Both conferences were called "Power of Woman" and both were a tremendous success with over 1000 women in attendance. The programmatic thrust of all of the gatherings of women have been toward liberation, inner healing and personal growth.

Another phase of our ministry to women is the Allen Women's Resource Center, a housing program which provides temporary shelter for women and children who are victims of domestic violence. This 20-bed facility is funded by the City of New York and is located in one of the church's buildings. The church also sponsors the South Jamaica Multi-Service Center which contains a Clinic, Headstart Program, Graduate Equivalency Diploma Program, Women and Infant Care Center (W.I.C.), Drug Rehabilitation, Pre-natal/Post-natal Clinic and Counselling, a Driving While Intoxicated program, and the Allen Housing Corporation, which recently sponsored the building of 122 affordable two-

family homes. Additionally, the Church owns a Bus Chartering Service, a print shop, a Home Improvement and Modernization Company, and fifteen stores which comprise the Allen Plaza shopping strip.

The Allen Church ministry has been successful because of the synergy of human effort and the favor of God. The Allen Church family and members of the Jamaica community have proven to be a unique people who "have thought it not robbery" to contribute to the rebuilding of their lives and their community. They are a people who have realized the possibilities of God in their midst, and have allowed reality of that possibility to motivate them to producing great results which might be simply defined as "miraculous." On a personal note, I must add that the hand of God has been so evident in our lives that the memory of it consistently humbles me and often reduces me to tears. God and the power of God's Holy Spirit have been the ever-present reality during our 16 years at Allen Church and in the Jamaica community, and even during our moments of great trial, the move of God has been so utterly dynamic and unquestionable on our behalf that I cannot doubt God's purpose for our lives.

PROJECT FOCUS

This project will focus on "womanist preaching" as a praxiological response to womanist theology and womanist biblical hermeneutics. The conjecture is that one of the greatest challenges for African American preachers who are female (or male) is to understand and assume the moral and spiritual responsibility of preaching toward the empowerment and liberation of marginalized and "hurting" women.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

I have always believed that the preaching moment is the most important aspect of the worship experience. The songs of Zion may fill the sanctuary, the prayers of the people will touch the heart of God, and the praise jubilantly goes forth from the hearts and lips of every participating worshipper, but there is no moment so vital and sustaining to the worship experience as the moment of the preached Word. The sermon is the focal point, the "highest place" of the service: it is the essence of the Church's linkage with the Almighty God. As the solitary messenger stands before the expectant congregation, inherent in the role now assumed is a responsibility to enthusiastically proclaim the truths of the gospel under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and to effectively and urgently communicate its transforming and redemptive power.

As they have gathered for worship, those who have come have brought with them their various problems, concerns, and expectations, and they have come needing and hoping for a Word from the Lord. Their fears need to be calmed, their minds need to be strengthened, and their hearts need to be made glad. Through her or his "oneness" with God, self, and

humanity, the preacher must bring that "Word" which transforms and makes a difference in the lives of all those who hear. The preaching event, then, is that time in which God responds to the conditions of God's people and reveals God's self, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through God's preacher to God's people.

Responsibility and integrity demand that every preacher preach a gospel that is salvific and liberating to all people. This must certainly be the sermonic goal of those of us who preach to the African American community. With all of its imagination and prophetic insight, "Black preaching" has traditionally been characterized by interpretive methodologies that demonstrate a commitment to the eradication of individual sin and the liberation of the Black community from racism, social injustice and economic oppression. One missing hermeneutical element has been its sensitivity to the Black female experience. If anything, "Black preaching" and its traditional biblical interpretations have often robbed Black women of their freedom and authentic personhood. In fact, the interpretations have accommodated and perpetuated our oppression and woundedness.

It is my belief that preaching in the African American Church must be established in a true hermeneutic of liberation, one that requires the liberation of men and women. Womanist theology emerges as the theoretical

paradigm that provides the theological framework and the interpretive principles that will deconstruct those androcentric patriarchal texts that have traditionally oppressed African American women and men, as it employs a socio-historical reconstruction of the biblical text that sets free all of those who have been bound.

Womanist Theological Reflections

Womanist theology is a positive and constructive move on the part of African American Christian women to affirm and express themselves within the context of their own history and experiences with racism and sexism in the Church and society. It emerged as an inevitable and necessary response to feminist and Black liberation theologies. While professing to speak to the totality of women's oppression and Black people's marginalization, those theologies proved to be guilty of the same crimes that they accused the White, male-dominated systems of perpetrating against women and African Americans. Feminist theology spoke to the oppression that Black women experience in the patriarchialism of the Church and society, but feminist theology was insensitive to (and often participated in) Black women's experiences with racism. Likewise, Black theology addressed Black women's issues of racism but refused to acknowledge its own sexist articulation and actions. Thus, in their determination to be affirmed and heard in the sound of their own diverse and multi-dimensional voices, African American women, were forced to break with the feminist and Black liberation traditions.

Black women gave birth to their own theology, which they coined "womanist."[1]

The 1960's and 1970's gave birth to liberation movements that rocked the very foundations of American and European traditions. It was during this period that the voices of oppressed peoples all over the world began to cry out for freedom from the White-male-dominated structures that had deprived them of full and equal participation in the mainstream of society, and had also caused them to accept and internalize negative and degrading images about themselves. African Americans, South Africans, Latin Americans, Asians, and Euro-American women began to evaluate and challenge every aspect of the racist, classist or sexist experience in which they existed, and liberation movements aimed at eliminating oppressive structures erupted throughout the world.

It is out of the context of these critiques that liberation theologies have evolved and collided with the traditional Christian theologies of Europe and North America. Traditional theologies had developed a White,

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[1]Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose, (Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii. Walker cites that the term "womanist" has its origins in the black folk expression, "You acting womanish," ...wanting to know more and in greater depth that is good for one... outrageous, audacious and willful behavior. She is "responsible, in charge, serious...." and is committed to the survival of her people and their culture. She loves men, women, and herself. A womanist is a Black feminist or a feminist of color; "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

middle-class, patriarchal interpretation of Scripture, experience and tradition, as they attempted to interpret God's activity among people. It was the task of liberation theologies to analyze and expose the injustices of such theological assertions, and to reject them, even as liberation theologies offered alternatives to an ideology which oppressed human beings.

It must be noted, however, that while liberation theologies had successfully upset the equilibrium of those theological systems guilty of oppression, those same theologies had been so "narrow" and one-dimensional in their articulation that they ignored and even participated in other forms of oppression. This is especially true of the two dominate liberation theologies of North America--Black Theology and feminist Theology. While Black theology rejected racism, it had been primarily voiced by Black men who embraced sexism with much candor and tenacity; and while feminist theology renounced sexism, it had been the work of White women who have unashamedly clung to a racist perspective that had spurned and oppressed women of color. In both instances, the victims of these theologies were Black women. The "most oppressed of all the oppressed"[2], Black women determined to seek liberation from all racist,

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[2] Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979, eds. Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 419.

classist and sexist structures. Womanist theology arose from the desire of Black women to address their tri-dimensional oppression from their own theological perspectives.

Confronting Black Male Hypocrisy

One of the most painful realities that Black women in America have had to endure was their experience of oppression at the hand of Black men. Painful, because having shared the same African heritage, the same slave ships, the same cotton fields and the same segregated water fountains, the logical assumption was that the mutual oppression and suffering of Black women and men in racist America had created such a bond that sexism would not have been a reality "within" the Black community. Since Black men had rejected the racism of the patriarchal structures of America, it was difficult for Black women to understand how their "co-sufferers" could continue to embrace the White patriarchal model of female oppression. As they began to gain in "power and participation" in a male-dominated America, Black men used that power to subjugate the same women who had been in the struggle with them.

With the emergence of Black liberation theology, most Black women endured and were "publicly" silent about the sexism of Black men, not because they did not desire to end their maltreatment, but because they felt that the most

important issue was liberation from racist oppression. Their subtle and overt gender-oppressed-realities within the Black community were so glaringly akin to patriarchal oppression that soon Black women did not continue to suppress their hurt and indignation. The same thirst for human dignity that made them speak out against the injustices of racism also compelled them to end their silence about the sexist treatment at the hands of Black men.

Because they were reluctant to speak the antagonistic, divisive language of the feminist movement that emerged in the 60's, Black women's voices took a conciliatory tone. They realized that there remained the need for partnership with Black men as they struggled against racism in America. With the continued and sustained misogynist thinking and actions of Black men in their home, community and Church, however, Black women's discontent surfaced publicly. Aretha Franklin's recordings of "Respect" and "Do Right Woman--Do Right Man" were some of the first of many signals sent to Black men of the 60's that all was not well on the home front. Franklin's demands in these selections for equality and an understanding relationship with Black men clearly set the tone for that which would emerge as the basis of the Black women's liberation movement of the seventies. Toni Cade's, The Black Woman, Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf, and

Michele Wallace's Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman, came later to "reaffirm Black women's commitment to the Black struggle for freedom, while signaling their determination to be accepted as equal partners in that struggle and in the Black community itself."[3]

Perhaps Black women thought that their "signaling" would be enough to heighten Black men's awareness of their oppressive actions and their insensitivity to their women's pain. They hoped that their call for equality would heighten the humanity and consciousness of Black men and challenge them to abandon their sexist behavior. That did not happen, however. James Cone writes of Black male's response when the issue of Black male sexism was first raised by Black women around Union Theological Seminary and other places.

> *".....black men misused their (Black women's) silence by refusing to even consider that sexism was a real problem in the Black community. Black men continued to claim that 'Black women have always been free.'"*[4]

Cone also writes:

> *"Because black men knew that black women were deeply committed to the racial struggle, they did not even take seriously black women's concern for sexual oppression. They merely laughed, treating the hurt and the pain of our*

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[3]Kelly D. Brown, "God is as Christ Does: Toward a Womanist Theology," The Journal of Religious Thought vol. 46 no. 1 (Summer-Fall 1989): 12.

[4]James Cone, My Soul Looks Back, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 118.

sisters as a joke."[5]

The truth is that the same Black men who talked about human equality as they struggled for freedom from racism had themselves adopted their oppressors' patriarchal structures and embellished the notion of male supremacy and domination. Ironically, they allowed the same traditions which had fought so hard to preserve Black enslavement, colonialism and imperialism provide the normative perception of women for Black society. Black men had allowed the "enemy" to define the realities of the Black woman in their own communities, and they perpetuated the same oppression they claimed to abhor.

Black women began to challenge their male counterparts on theological issues. Black men had chosen to forget, overlook and deny that the same Bible that rejects racism, often rejects sexism. The holistic and inclusive interpretation of the gospel that Black men purported in the Civil Rights Movements definitely required that Black women be liberated from androcentrism and sexist marginality. If Black liberation thinking was authentic and grounded in a liberating anthropology, inherent in that tradition would be the affirmation that just as "in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek," likewise, "in Christ there

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[5]James Cone, For My People, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 131.

is neither male nor female."[6] Black women's liberation thinking envisioned a religio-socio-cultural system that fostered equality for all Black people-- men, women and children.

When many Black women saw that their "brothers" refused to take their cry for justice seriously, they could no longer completely reject the White feminist movement from which they had remained apart. No longer could they assert that the struggle for women's rights was solely a White middle-class phenomenon which was unrelated to the Black community's liberation movement. Black women were forced to question and challenge the Black man's commitment to the Black liberation struggle, in light of his conscious oppression of Black women.

Feminist Theology Not The Answer For Black Women

Initially, Black female theologians who embraced feminist theology were called and called themselves "Black feminists." Their experiences with sexism, both inside and outside their community, forced Black women of the seventies to try to identify with White women's experiences with

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[6]Clarice Martin, "Womanist Interpretation of the New Testament," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, eds. Judith Plaskow and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, vol. 6 no. 2 (Fall 1990): 51.

sexist oppression. They attempted to move in feminist liberation circles, just as their nineteenth century ancestors had affiliated with the women's suffrage movement. However, history repeated itself as it became obvious to Black women that the feminist movement, like its predecessor, was not for non-White women. The feminist movement had been completely and narrowly defined by White women and its ideologies and tradition were grounded in White women's history and experiences only. It was a game in which White women established the rules and then solicited others to play only according to their rules.[7]

White women's analysis was one-dimensional and did not appropriately communicate or honestly reflect Black women's cultural realities and experiences with sexism, racism and classism. It soon became apparent that "the biological realties of Blackness and femaleness [gave] Black women a unique status in a society that tend[ed] to devalue both [B]lackness and women"[8] *and Black women soon came to the realization that there was very little "common ground" on which they and their White counterpart could establish a theological framework and methodology. Although they shared with White women in the inferior position assigned to females in this sexist society, the fact that patriarchy had*

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[7]Jacquelyn Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 200.

[8]Brown, 8.

given White females a position of power (which they have exercised) over Black women had created a breach which could be neither denied or minimized.

Delores Williams even challenged feminist theology's definition of patriarchy which names men as the sole oppressors of Black women. Williams claims that the experience of Black females is misrepresented when their oppression is expressed in terms of a language that only identifies men as oppressors of women.[9] *To define "patriarchy" as "rule by men", and to name it as the structure that is responsible for the oppression of all women denies the role that White women have chosen as oppressors of Black women. While patriarchy may describe the White feminists' oppression, it is also the institution that has designed and encouraged their oppression of Black women. Hence, a nomenclature that named patriarchy as the evil that oppresses all women was inadequate for the naming of the control and subjugation of Black women by White males and females.*

> *The failure of white feminists to emphasize the substantial difference between their patriarchally-derived-privileged-oppression and black women's demonically-derived-annihilistic-oppression renders black women invisible in feminist thought and action.*[10]

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[9]Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," The Journal of Religious Thought 43 no.1 (Spring-Summer 1986): 50.

[10]Ibid., 50.

The truth is, White women were interested only in eliminating (their own) sexist oppression, and Black women, being excluded from feminist articulation were left without a language and theological voice that reflected their unique history and experience. Williams offers the term "demonarchy" as the adequate description of the "demonic governance of Black women's lives by White male and female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, retardation, and death as instruments of social control."[11] *Grounded in the belief that White men are the "ultimate" of all humanity and that White women are superior to and more precious than all other women of color, demonarchy is the term that accurately describes the racist-gender oppression of Black women.*[12]

The "uncommonness" of goals and agenda is also evidenced in Rosemary Ruether's article, "Feminist Theology and Spirituality." Insisting that the need for feminist theology arises out of the historical reality of sexism in human societies, she defines the authentic meaning and

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[11]Ibid., 52.

[12]"Demonarchy" is a term used by Delores Williams in her article, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue" printed in The Journal of Religious Thought, 43 no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1986) : 52. Demonarchy is defined by Williams as the demonic governance of Black women's lives by White male and White female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation, and retardation and death as instruments of social control. Further, it is informed by a consciousness that believes White women are superior to Black women.

message of feminist theology as "redemption from sexism." She further conjectures that the ultimate goal of the Church, if it is to be true to its' call and intent, is the establishing and maintaining of feminist liberation communities in which women will experience and shape a community of liberation from sexism.[13] *Ruether sees feminist theology as the healing agent for the diseased patriarchical Christian Church, and suggests that it (feminist theology) can essentially convert Christian theology into a human-centered theology that affirms the personhood of men and women alike. This was the basic premise upon which feminist theology was built. Sexism was the only real sin, and redemption and true liberation would be achieved through the elimination of sexism in language, the university, the home, the Church, etc. Delores Williams' response to Ruether's definition of sin and her vision for an authentic Christian Church states clearly the Black woman's objection to the language and methodology of feminist theology.*

> *In this instance, Ruether fails to envision a contemporary understanding of church that also seeks to live its faith as repentance of racism and classism. When the North American church lives only to repent of sexism and move away from patriarchy, it remains a diseased, sinful institution registering no concern for poor, black women and women of color. When Anglo-American feminist theologians advocate transformation in social and religious*

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[13]Rosemary Reuther, "Feminist Theology and Spirituality," adapted for Christianity and Crisis, (March 4, 1985): 57-62.

> *institutions only on the basis of the gender oppression, these theologians inadvertently reinforce another evil that continues to prevail in most theological academies: the evil of white supremacy.*[14]

While African-American women acknowledged and abhorred the existence of sexism inside and outside the academies and the Christian Church, and while they were the "victims" of sexist institutions and acts perpetrated by both White and African-American men, to embark upon a one-dimensional theological intent would have been self-injurious and short-visioned. African-American women's theology needed to confront the full gambit of "sins" that oppressed them and their community. Black women's concerns were undeniably different from that of White women. Williams points this out to Ruether when she refutes her suggestion that a point of unity among White, African, African-American and Asian Christian women is based on their "alleged corroboration of the 'legitimacy of encountering the divine as goddess.'" Williams sees a problem and basic lack of sensitivity with Ruether's assertion because "the divine goddess is a concern emphasized in white feminist theology...." There is not enough data to suggest that this is a major concern for other Christian women of color.[15]

In addition, African-American Christian women's love

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[14]Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism," Christianity and Crisis, (April 29, 1985): 158-165.

[15]Ibid., 164.

of the Spirit, and the respect that they show for the presence and the work of the spirit is not reflected in feminist theology. The White feminist emphasis on language, liturgy and symbolism used in the worship experience is basically secondary to Black Christian women: their first desire for the worship experience is that the Spirit would move in such a way that it ministers healing and liberation to the entire Church community. Likewise, Jacquelyn Grant rightly contends that feminists have failed to deal with Black women's Jesus, as Jesus has been revealed to and experienced by Black women. White women theologians have been so preoccupied with the maleness of Jesus, that they have essentially scorned Black women's understanding of the significance of Jesus and their comfort with his gender. For Black women the "significance of Christ is not his maleness, but his humanity."[16] *It is the humanity of Christ, the reality of his experiences with oppression and his ultimate victory over that oppression that have enabled Black women to identify with him as "the God of the oppressed." Lastly, feminist thinkers largely have not acknowledged that the Bible continues to provide the framework for the Christian Black woman's religious and theological thought. Their critique of the biblical text is situated in White women's experience, but for Black women to do theology, the scripture must be read, heard and engaged*

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[16]Grant, 220.

within the context of her own experience. "Black women of the past did not hesitate in doing this, and we must do no less."[17] *More and more, Black women were (and still are) in love with themselves, their culture, their history, their community and their God. They developed a theology which called for a holistic healing and redemption of the Black community, the Church, the academies, and society. There had to be an atmosphere in which they had the "freedom to explore the particularities of Black women's history and culture without being guided by what White feminists have already identified as women's issues."*[18] *The intellectual and spiritual call was for African-American Christian women to "transcend" feminist theology and adopt a "multidialogical intent" which would allow Christian women "to advocate and participate in dialogue and action with many diverse social, political, and religious communities concerned about human survival and productive quality of life for the oppressed."*[19] *African-American Christian women "determined that they and the entire race will survive." "The details of that determination" had to be*

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[17]Ibid., 212.

[18]Ibid., 182.

[19]Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology," in Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, ed. J. Plaskow and C. Christ, 184.

expressed in a theological statement.[20] *Thus womanist theology evolved.*

Womanist Theology emerges from the African-American community and experience, and its path of development has been from the community into the academy (in contrast to those theologies which were born in the academy and traveled into the community). Its presence in the academy and its emergence as a viable "theology" is clearly owed to the expressed dissatisfaction of a large number of African-American women, inside and outside the academy, with the power arrangements of society. Womanist theologians resented the lack of integrity that characterized the traditions of their so-called "advocates," and brought forth a "privatized" theology that rejected the Black woman's traditional "assigned" roles in society and within the Black community. Their experience as wife, lover, mother and sister was so significant, however, that their fight for liberation and deliverance from all oppressive structures could not be to the exclusion of the Black family. The knowledge that White American families (fathers, mothers, children) in every social class have the power to oppress the Black family (mothers, fathers, children) dictated that her goals for Black women's liberation could not be

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[20]Delores Williams, The Black Woman Portrayed in Selected Black Imaginative Literature and Some Questions for Black Theology, (M. Div. Thesis, Union Theological Seminary), 75.

separated from her desire for her family's liberation[21] *(even the reality Black-male-oppression could not distract Black women from their commitment to their liberation). Theirs would, indeed, be a "universal" effort to raise the consciousness of the whole of humanity in regard to gender, race and class oppression.*

Womanist theologians span the socio-economic, political, and educational gambit of the African-American Christian community, and it is expressed in the language of women who are committed to the validation of the Black experience in society, religion and in history. Every womanist theologian is a mother, for though she may or may not have borne a child, she nurtures all Black people in the liberation struggle; she is a "contemporary prophet, calling other women forth so that they can break away from the oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality."[22] *She is preacher, teacher and a student, who takes seriously her responsibility to discover truth and articulate it in a language that guarantees and strengthens her own self-importance and that of her community. She loves herself, her Jesus, and knows that God is a Spirit who is free of gender and racial*

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[21]Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," 55.

[22]Katie Geneva Cannon, "Black Feminist Consciousness," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Letty Russell, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 40.

designation. She is "empowered by the knowledge that she knows best how to fight for her own liberation and the liberation of her people,"[23] and her commitment is to that liberation. African American Christian women's gift to themselves, their community and humankind is womanist theology, and as Black women develop and expand, it will develop and expand, and together they will create and discover new dimensions of personhood, worship experiences and life in their community.

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[23]Delores S. Williams, " 'The Color Purple,'" Christianity and Crisis (July 1986): 230-232.

A Contemporary Womanist Interpretation Of Scripture

Stephen Breck Reid states that "black biblical interpretation begins with Black experience" and that a Black biblical hermeneutic must interpret the Black experience and the biblical text as well.[24] *He believes that a Black biblical hermeneutic evolves not only as we use scripture to establish and study our identity, but also that Black biblical interpretation re-discovers the historical/cultural/ religious traditions of the text so that community can find itself therein. In her article "Mother to the Motherless," Cheryl Gilkes confirms Breck's analysis when she asserts that "an Afrocentric reading of the Bible is a reading that incorporates the events that are central to the Black experience and affirms the dignity of the African personality in the face of the forces of degradation...."*[25] *Unequivocally, Black biblical interpretation must be informed by a "hermeneutic of*

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[24]Stephen Breck Reid, Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics. (Nashville, Abingdon, 1990), 12, 18-19.

[25]Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless': Power, Gender, and Community in an Afrocentric Biblical Tradition," Semeia 47 (1989): 63.

affirmation."[26] By acknowledging that the Bible gives all humanity a vision of salvation that includes spiritual, economic and political empowerment, the Black community is re-assured of its divine entitlement to justice and an "oppression-free" existence.

Inherent in contemporary womanist consciousness is a prophetic tradition of biblical interpretation that sanctions and affirms Black women's experiences, past and present. By using their own interpretive principle, womanist theologians engage in an investigation and critique of the Bible that remembers their history as it creates new and variegated realities which will provide the divine healing, inclusion and empowerment that they and their community need. These new realities can only be accomplished with the destruction of those traditional and oppressive interpretations of the biblical text that have been birthed in "demonarchy."

As womanist preachers and theologians assume the task of biblical interpretation and preaching, it is critical and imperative that they both implement an interpretive process that is liberating and affirming, and develop a methodology and hermeneutic that is situated in "Black female sensitivity" and contextual reality. Because Eurocentric

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[26]"A hermeneutic of affirmation" is used by Cheryl Gilkes (p.63). It refers to an Afrocentric reading of the Bible that incorporates the events that are central to the Black experience and affirms the dignity of the African personality in the face of the forces of degradation.

biblical analysis has traditionally oppressed marginalized people who are female and of African descent, it becomes the task of womanist preachers to engage in an interpretation of scripture that rejects any racist or misogynist biblical analyses, and to seek to implement a "hermeneutic of healing" that authenticates the humanity of African American women, and speaks to their condition and experiences, past and present. We must commit ourselves to becoming the embodiment of Isaiah's mission statement:

> *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prisons to those who are bound...to comfort all who mourn...to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.... (Isaiah 61:1-3)*[27]

Not only should the womanist preacher's hermeneutic provide existential insight into the dilemmas that grip African American women's existence, but it should also reflect and advocate a way of life to which African American female readers genuinely aspire.[28] *Womanist scholars reject feminist methodologies which de-value the text that their great-grandmothers loved, and through their critical analysis of the scripture, they apply an egalitarian reading and interpretation of the text. Womanist theologians must use their talents, their resources and their insights to*

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[27]All scriptural citations in the document are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

[28]Weems, 63.

appropriate the liberating and self-affirming aspects of the text. Sound exegetical treatments can legitimately yield a liberation/ womanist hermeneutic to the reading of scripture that validates African American women's experience and uncovers the infinite liberating aspects of the biblical text. These uncoverings involve not only commentaries and books as resources, but also the poetry and music of her church and her community.[29]

Womanist theology provides the theological and hermeneutical ground that insists that Black women can "contextualize" the Bible and see it as a paradigm of liberation. Developing reading strategies that ascribe a liberationist hermeneutic to the Bible means that Black women determine that it is in the best interest of African-American women to identify interpretative principles that exercises a "measure of hermeneutical control over the Bible."[30] *As readers of the text, Womanist theologians provide a historical/cultural critical study of the biblical text that demonstrates that African American Christian women's experience can be legitimately affirmed in the biblical text. Such a critique will also substantiate their*

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[29] Reid, 21.

[30] Vincent Wimbush suggests that it will be "impossible for Afro-Christian churches to articulate self-understanding, maintain integrity as separate communities, and determine their mission in the world", unless they exercise a degree of "hermeneutical control over the Bible." See his article "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation," Semeia 49 (1989): 47-48.

understanding that "portions of the Bible describe a world where the oppressed are liberated, the last become first, the humble are exalted, the despised are preferred, the rejected are welcomed, the long suffering are rewarded, the dispossessed are repossessed, and the arrogant are prostrated."[31] Thus, in the midst of traditional critical analysis, and often in spite of the voice of the dominate culture, Black women's biblical hermeneutic will still be heard.

A womanist hermeneutic is critical for the continuation and formation of a process of the Black woman's self-identification among the female characters in the Bible. The goal is to intensify the voices of women in biblical narrative.[32] Further, Clarice Martin asserts that "for the womanist biblical interpreter, fervid, if painstaking, searches for women's voices must proceed not only with reference to women in biblical narratives, but also with a concomitant concern for all of those who by virtue of race, class, or other anthropological referents, have been historically marginalized by the biblical traditions and/or writers themselves, and by interpreters of those

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[31] Weems, 70-71.

[32]See Renita Weems' Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible, (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).

traditions."[33] To be able to find solidarity with the marginalized of the biblical text, the Black experience, in general, and the Black woman's experience, in particular, must be interpreted and affirmed through those biblical witnesses. Black women must be able to see their experience through the reading of the text, and their experience must shape their reading of the text.

This process, which is invaluable in preaching and teaching settings in the Black Church, is made easy, initially, because historical analysis has revealed the presence of several women of African descent in scripture. The task of womanist theologians, however, is not only to expose and emphasize the historical heritage of these women, but to confront those who would deny that heritage. In her book, An Introduction to the Old Testament--A Feminist Perspective, Alice L. Laffey shows her insensitivity to Black women's experience and search for historical truth. In her portrayal of the women who are traditionally considered "women of color," not only is their African heritage minimized, their struggles arising from that heritage is denied and the ultimate victories ignored. Hagar and Zipporah are described as mere "foreigners," and the social implications of that "foreign" status are buried

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[33]Clarice Martin, "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion vol. 6 no.2 (Fall 1990): 51.

in her feminist rhetoric. To reduce the conflict between Hagar and Sarah to that of a wife and concubine[34] *is to deny the racist implications inherent in that narrative and its traditional interpretations. For African American female readers, Hagar is not a mere concubine; she is a woman of color who represents and dialogues with all of the marginalized women who are her descendants. Her ultimate victory and survival in the desert speaks to the possibility of African American women even in the midst of a hopeless situation. Additionally, a womanist hermeneutic can also find redemption in the God who seemingly sided with Sarah when that God commanded Abraham to cast Hagar out of his home. Black women should see that expulsion from their household as inconsequential in the light of her liberation from the oppressive Sarah and the apathetic Abraham, and her ultimate restoration to safety and security. Likewise, Laffey's presentation of a feminist interpretation of the story of Zipporah neglects and gives no credence to Miriam and Aaron's hatred of Zipporah because she is a Cushite woman.*[35] *She offers no insight into the character's probable feelings of rejection, nor does she explore the social implications regarding the issue of her Blackness. Feminist readings like these are inadequate for Black women,*

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[34]Alice L. Laffey, An Introduction To The Old Testament--A Feminist Perspective, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 33-38.

[35]Laffey, 48-51.

and demand that a responsible womanist interpretation release these female characters of African ancestry from the bondage of White interpretations.

A womanist hermeneutic also affords an appropriation of other females who have not traditionally been thought of as women of color. Feminists like Fiorenza and D'Angelo, have accused biblical patriarchy of shaping texts about women that are misogynous and oppressive in their formulation.[36] *For example, their feminist analyses accuse the Gospel writer, Luke, of an androcentric bias that results in an unfair treatment of women. While some of their interpretive concerns regarding Luke's truncation of women's voices may be legitimate, a womanist hermeneutic, however, sees the apparent liberation of the women in Luke as more beneficial to the African American female experience than some of the critiques arising from the socio-textual analysis of feminist biblical interpretation. Thus a womanist approach to the text sees in Luke, not only a sense of fairness as it relates to women, but also a sense of compassion and concern for them. Luke established that many women, because of their gender and socio-economic status, were excluded from "community," and his message to Black women is that Jesus*

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[36]See Schüssler Fiorenza's article, "A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Luke 10:38-42," Religion and Intellectual Life 3 (1986): 21-35, and D'Angelo's article, "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View," Journal of Biblical Literature 109/3 (1990): 441-461.

not only loves them but is also committed to their complete physical, emotional, social and economic restoration back into the community from which they have been alienated.

Luke's presentation of Jesus as he heals the woman with the spirit of infirmity in Chapter 13: verse 10-14, is unquestionably a passage in which the African American woman can see Jesus' uncompromising concern for her as a woman. As this bent-over, spirit-oppressed woman enters the synagogue on the sabbath, Jesus is touched with compassion for her and is moved in such a way that he heals her without any appeal from her to do so, and at the risk of incurring the wrath of his opponents (v. 14-17). In this woman, Black women who are burdened down and oppressed can see their experience of pain and emotional trauma, and they can also see their deliverance from that oppression. Likewise, Jesus' encounter with the woman with the issue of blood proves to be equally as affirming to Black women (Luke 8:43-48). The fact that Jesus does not hesitate to minister to this woman in the midst of his dealings with the male Jarius (40-56) can assuredly speak to Black women's feeling of invisibility and ostracization. That Jesus not only heals her but he restores her to complete wholeness cannot be minimized. She who has been marginalized and alienated is restored to wholeness and community. These stories and several more (eg. the widow of Nain, 7:11-17; the woman who was a sinner, 7:36-50; the deliverance of Mary Magdalene,

Joanna and Susanna, 8:1-3) when approached from a womanist hermeneutical foundation, give Black Christian women the opportunity to see their experiences in the experiences of the women in the biblical text and to find liberation and hope in these stories.

PERSONAL GOALS

The history of the African American Church reveals that this institution has often represented for its community, both a source of spiritual development, and economic, social, and emotional nurture. For a people who have experienced widespread oppression and isolation in this country, the Church has been the institution that lent them money when the banks would not, buried their dead when there were no insurance policies, promoted and exhibited individual and collective talents and skills that the larger culture would have ignored, addressed social issues that impaired the quality of life and provided a much-needed social outlet. In short, the African-American Church has emerged, from the very beginning, as the center of life in the Black community. Because I believe that the Church was founded to be a liberating and enabling entity that ministers to the "whole" person, I see the role of the Black Church and its preachers in the 1990's as more crucial and necessary than ever. The violence, oppression and depravity that effect every area of the African American community compels "the called and sent" to make a difference in the

lives of Black women and men, as we make ministry relevant and transforming.

The Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica, New York, is a 6000 member congregation, of which at least two-thirds are women. The fact that there are approximately four thousand women and four thousand "stories," sets of issues, and levels of brokenness in our congregation dictates the development of a meaningful and relevant seven-day-a-week ministry that addresses the melange of spiritual, social, physical and emotional needs. The trauma of unhappy, love-deficient marriages or relationships (often characterized by physical and /or emotional abuse), the frustration and loneliness that accompanies divorce, single parenting, and the life-altering effects of crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, incest and rape invade and inflict the realities of too many women within the congregation, and consequent self-hatred, guilt, depression, anxiety and emotional instability are evils that plague the females of the religious community. The Church must offer hope for renewal and a commitment to the universal health and well-being of these women who are in pain. The preaching moment is a moment of our proclamation to "infirmed" and hurting women.

As I have considered the issues confronting the Christian women of African ancestry who are members of Allen Church, and as I have observed their patterns of

church/workshop/Bible study attendance, I believe that it is essential that the preaching moment reflect a cognizance and sensitivity to the realities of those women to whom we preach. While the church often sponsors forums and events that would speak to Black women's issues, the numbers of women present at these events are significantly lower than they are on Sunday morning. Between the three morning worship services at Allen, there are approximately 1700 to 2000 women present. In addition, about 100 adults and almost 300 young women between the ages of 13 and 18, are in attendance at the youth services. Workshops, retreats, and Bible studies for women are assuredly meaningful and liberating for the ten to twenty percent of females who avail themselves to these encounters, but it is the Sunday morning preacher(s) who consistently stands before the majority of the women in the congregation. Since the people of God bring their various needs, concerns, expectations, and brokenness to the worship experience, it would be inexcusably negligent for those of us who preach to these women Sunday after Sunday not to assume the responsibility of preaching sermons that 1) expose the internal and external sin, evil and oppression that effects their lives, 2) affirm the personhood of all women of color, 3) proclaim a liberating truth and teaching that transforms and empowers even the weakest or the most broken vessel. I believe that this philosophy of preaching is borne out in the Lucan story

of the woman who was crippled by a spirit.

> *Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." (Luke 13: 10-12)*

In this scene, we find Jesus in the synagogue teaching (or preaching),[37] *when in the midst of his discourse, he saw a bent over woman, called her to come closer to him, spoke her healing, and set her free from the spirit that had crippled her for so long. Ergo, those of us who are charged to proclaim the Gospel are challenged to do as Jesus did: see women who are crippled by spirits, call them to a place of spiritual availability and accessibility, and speak words of healing to them--words that will empower and set them free from their infirmities.*

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[37]See Joseph A. Fitzmyer's explanation of the verb **didaskein**, **"teach"** in The Gospel According to Luke I-IX, (Doubleday: New York, 1981), 148. He concludes that the verb, didaskein, used in this pericope would indicate that Jesus was "preaching."

PROJECT GOALS

The goal of this project is to explore the theological and theoretical principles that will yield a womanist "hermeneutic of healing," and to emphasize preaching as that pragmatic response which communicates liberation and renewal, and participates in the healing process. Moreover, the project will survey and evaluate the effect and significance of womanist preaching in the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church. Womanist preaching, if it is anything, is corrective and should elicit a positive, constructive and life-changing response from the targeted community. It must not only proclaim the Word of God, and communicate the healing contained therein, but the women who hear the gospel must perceive it as truth, and be motivated to be "transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2) and actions. It should so inform, energize, reprove and correct those who perceive it correctly and receive it fully, that they will not be able to ignore or repress it. Preaching that is grounded in a womanist hermeneutic, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has the potential to be so utterly penetrating and charismatic for those in the assembly that, to use Jeremiah's language, it will be "like fire shut up in their bones." (Jeremiah 20:9)

With this in mind, a group of women from the church will act as a test-group or proving-ground for my theological and pedagogical findings. The consistent forum will be the Monday night "For Women Only Bible Study"; the "random" setting for testing will be the 1994 and 1995 Allen Women's Retreat. With both groups, preliminary questionnaires designed to reveal unresolved issues, areas of brokenness and levels or bondage, insecurity, fear, pain, unforgiveness, etcetera, will be distrubuted. The Monday night group will commit to regular attendance at Sunday service (especially those services at which I will be preaching) for one year--January, 1994 through January, 1995, as well as bible study on the following night. In addition to receiving feedback in the form of oral discussion, responses and suggestions (not only for my sermons, but any other sermons that might reflect a womanist interpretation of scripture), the women will give written sermon-evaluation/self-evaluation forms. At the end of the one year period, we will do an overall evaluation of the process and its impact on the lives of the women. The Retreat Group will be asked to submit the same sermon-evaluation/ self-evaluation form that the Monday night group receives, but they will respond to each sermonic experience.

Upon the compilation of the survey responses, and consideration of oral and "active" responses, hopefully the

conclusion will be that the theoretical and theological principles offered in the "scholarly" portion of this project will be supported by the practical findings. This will allow suggestions of a "healing" model of ministry for African American Women in the Church.

In this endeavor, not only will the need for an exegetical and interpretive process that makes the biblical text relevant and meaningful within the context of the sermon be discussed, but a move will be made toward the formation of a definition of "womanist preaching" (past and present), and identification of primary biblical paradigms that form a definitive conceptual framework for womanist sermons. Moving beyond the theoretical underpinnings that will evolve, some hermeneutical and homeletical tools will be offered that will generate sermons that reflect a womanist "hermeneutic of healing." In addition, implementation of the learned hermeneutical and homeletical principles will be incorporated in my own preaching. Through dialogue and follow-up with an identified group of "hurting women"-- female victims of spousal abuse, incest, rape and alcoholism who are present-- their responses (verbal, written and pragmatic) will be explored, and work toward the development of models and methodologies of interpretation that will assist preachers in the task of conceiving and preaching sermons will minister healing to hurting sisters.

SUMMARY OF LEARNINGS

This project is designed to challenge preachers to proclaim the gospel in such a way that it makes a difference in the lives of "hurting women." Because biblical interpretation has too often contributed to and provided the justification for the marginalization and oppression of African American women, it is important for the Black Church to establish a theoretical framework for biblical interpretation that demands and safeguards an egalitarian biblical hermeneutic. If the gospel is to be authentic and liberating in the lives of all marginalized and broken women, African American preachers, must abandon patriarchal, androcentric interpretations of scripture, and implement a womanist hermeneutic of liberation that speaks to Black women's realities and provides healing for their "hurting places."

In order to provide this model-in-ministry, I must explore and expand the theological and theoretical framework of womanist interpretation of scripture and womanist preaching. From the information gained, I will formulate interpretive methodologies out of which a womanist

hermeneutic of healing will evolve. The theoretical conclusions and the proposed hermeneutical and homiletical techniques will be informed and shaped by the sermon evaluations completed by the contextual associates.

The context associates will learn how to hear and evaluate sermons out of the context of their own experiences. The questionnaires have been designed to effect honest and constructive "self-inventory," as well as elicit candid responses to and evaluations of sermons. Upon the completion of this experience, context participants should have acquired new skills and techniques for reading and interpreting scripture, for identifying the liberating and healing aspects of scripture, and for "finding themselves" in the biblical text. Moreover, the hope is that the women who participate in this process will move closer to healing and authentic existence.

RESOURCE REVIEW

While quite a bit of work has been done in the areas of Black, feminist and womanist theologies, in Black, feminist and womanist biblical hermeneutics, and in Black preaching, not much has been written in the area of womanist preaching. This project, therefore, has been informed by the integrating of the thinking of some of the most notable scholars in these related disciplines. Below are some of the works that made a great contribution to the formulation of my thinking and praxis.

Cannon, Katie Geneva. "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church." In Searching the Scriptures--Volume One: A Feminist Introduction, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 326-337. Crossroad: New York, 1993.

Katie Cannon, in this article, establishes a theoretical framework and a hermeneutical goal for womanist preaching. Traditionally, Black preaching has been void of a womanist interpretation of scripture, just as womanist theological studies have neglected the area of homiletics. This womanist preacher calls for a blending of the two areas. She suggests that an interfacing of the tools and methodologies of Black preaching employed by Isaac R. Clark with the feminist liberationist critiques of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza will yield a hermeneutic and sermon that affirms and liberates Black women.

This article is the only article that I have found which specifically and effectively deals with the idea of womanist preaching. Cannon's analyses certainly assist in the identification and the deconstruction of the those texts that portray women negatively, and affirm the responsibility of the preacher to "satisfy the whole congregation's spiritual hunger."

Felder, Cain Hope, ed. Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

This collection of essays by noted African American biblical scholars explores several aspects of biblical interpretation in and for the Black community. All contributors, using their own interpretive principles and theological/historical findings, formulate new ideas around biblical authority within the Black

community and make the socio-historical components of Black experience a vital factor in bible reading.

Particularly helpful for my project were the articles by Thomas Hoyt, William Myers, and Renita Weems. Hoyt's article, "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship," asserts that the Black experience in America has influenced and shaped biblical interpretation, and that a Black hermeneutic should evolve from accurate historical findings and a relating of present experiences to the text. In "The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African-American Biblical Student," Myers addresses the dilemma that Black seminarians face when they are students in White institutions. He claims that Eurocentric hermeneutical methodologies conflict with the African American experience and the believing community's canonical perspective. Calling for the utilization of new reading and interpretive strategies among African American scholars, this writer challenges them to work toward the inclusion of this new perspective in the pedagogical content and structure of religious learning institutions. Finally, Weems explores the reading strategies and non-traditional methodologies of African American women who still regard the Bible as a tool for liberation. She shows the relationship between Black women's experience and their interpretation of the Bible.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation. *Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.*

_____. In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. *New York: Crossroads, 1983.*

Clearly, any discussion of womanist hermeneutics requires the feminist theological/ hermeneutical explorations of this author. Both of these works by Schüssler Fiorenza help lay the groundwork for critical biblical analyses that reflect "the female experience." They give critical insight into the development of interpretive methodologies that reject the androcentric patriarchal biblical interpretations that have traditionally marginalized and ignored women. The hermeneutical goal is to implement a feminist-historical exegesis that "writes women back into the biblical text."

Although Schüssler Fiorenza's critiques neglect the racial component of patriarchal oppression and only speak to White women's experiences with sexism, her scholarship represents the beginning of the paradigm shift in theoretical models and heuristic concepts in biblical interpretation--the move from androcentric to female-centered Bible reading. In Memory of Her contributes helpful discussions on androcentric biblical translations and interpretations and feminist historical reconstructions. In Bread Not Stone, her chapters entitled "The Function of Scripture in the Liberation Struggle," and "Toward a Critical-Theological Self-Understanding of Biblical Scholarship" informed my thinking and theological conclusions.

Glaz, Maxine and Moessner, Jeanne Stevenson. Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

This book gives insight into some very critical female-issues that are should be addressed pastorally (and sermonically). The articles contain practical information which enable caregivers (and preachers) to give appropriate pastoral care to women. Each article explores an aspect of the female experience, focuses on the gender needs of women, and offers theoretical and practical consideration for understanding and eliminating those oppressive forces in the lives of women. Ramsay's article, "Sexual Abuse and Shame," Garma's essay entitled "Battered Women," and the article on "Women's Depression" by Neuger contained pertinent information that would affirm the need and inform a hermeneutic to enable preachers to formulate sermons which can become a healing agent to hurting women.

Gonzalez, Justo L. and Catherine. Liberation Preaching--The Pulpit and the Oppressed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.

I have found this work to be a practical and informative "handbook" for biblical interpretation and preaching. It lends great foundational support for the development of a "hermeneutic of liberation" and a "womanist hermeneutic of healing." Demonstrating that the Bible is written from the perspective of the "powerless," these authors proceed to challenge their readers to discover and uncover the obvious biases of White male biblical interpreters. The aim is to move

toward the adoption of a theology that demands a "liberating" appropriation of the text by the oppressed.

Newsom, Carol A. and Ringe, Sharon H., eds. The Women's Bible Commentary. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

This commentary contains scholarly, female-sensitive articles written by women in the biblical field. It shows biblical interpretation from the side of women. An analysis of each book of the Bible and an introduction to some women characters contained therein, affords female Bible readers an opportunity to "see themselves" in the biblical text. The Women's Bible Commentary, while not as thorough or exhaustive as I would have liked it to be, is the first of its kind and provides an innovative and necessary dimension to traditional exegesis.

Park, Andrew Sung. The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

For too long salvation has been the only business of the Church! Park theorizes that the Christian Church has traditionally focused on the sin and salvation of the sinner, and has ignored the pain and the suffering of those who have been the victims of sin. He calls for a theological revolution that will offer a bilateral perspective of sin: one that not only deals with the salvation of the sinner, but also addresses the reality of the han (the wound or the scar) of sin's victims. The Church will not fulfill its mission the Church until it embraces a theology and praxis that is grounded in the reality that reconciliation with God and humanity cannot be achieved until wounded hearts have been healed.

The Wounded Heart of God formulates a global theology which diagnoses the pain of the world, explains the relational consequences of sin, prescribes a cure, and envisions humanity's wholeness. I found this book particularly helpful conceptually. Andrew Sung Park's thinking and his church/community model served as a corrective for my own thinking about "sin," as they broadened and re-focused my notion of the mission of the Church.

Reid, Stephen Breck. Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990.

Reid makes a very valuable contribution to the understanding of Black biblical hermeneutics. His basic theory is that "black biblical interpretation begins with black experience," and his hermeneutical methodology consists of the following movements: "a critical reading of the text; the recovery of Black interpretation of the text; and the application of the text to the life experience of the black community." His challenge for African American Christians is to develop experience-centered strategies for reading and interpreting the Bible. A Black biblical hermeneutic must interpret the Black experience and the text as well.

Experience and Tradition, while void of an emphasis on "womanist preaching," emerges as an invaluable resource for preaching in the Black church, and certainly helps to shape my theology and hermeneutical and homiletical goals for preaching to women. A Black interpretation of scripture must preach a universal gospel; not just one that speaks to and for the Black community but one that speaks to the whole of the contemporary culture with all of its experience with pain and brokenness.

Smith, Christine M. Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

Smith offers a unique challenge to contemporary preachers. She maintains that authentic preaching must be sensitive to all forms of oppression, as it acts as a corrective for dehumanizing conditions and attitudes. She believes that preaching should interpret contemporary situations in the world, and should project appropriate responses to the evils of sexism, racism, ageism, classism, handicappism and heterosexism. She proposes that the preacher must weep about the radical evils that plague our society, call the church to confession, and challenge Christians to resist the attitudes and structures that oppress, exploit and dehumanize. The chapters on sexism, racism and classism are the ones that were helpful to my project.

Tate, W. Randolph. Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach. Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991.

This book was extremely helpful in providing insight into the area of biblical interpretation, contexualization, and "contemporization." Tate offers his readers three vital methodologies for bible-reading and biblical interpretation: author-centered approaches to meaning, text centered approaches to meaning, and reader-centered approaches to meaning. He demonstrates to biblical scholars how to integrate the past and the present, as they move toward an informed perception of the text.

Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

_____. "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," In Black Theology: A Documentary History--Volume II (1980-1992), eds. James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

The writings of Delores Williams make a critical contribution to my womanist theological reflections. They, in general, give the theoretical framework for womanist theology that is important to my discussion of womanist preaching. She expands and explores the definition of womanist theology as she also, discusses its tension with Black and feminist theologies. Sisters in the Wilderness addresses the poverty, exploitation, sexism and God-encounter characteristic of the African-American women's experience to the experiences of Hagar. Her explorations show that Black women's theology must be situated in their own historical, cultural, and religious experiences.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bennett, Robert A. "Black Experience and the Bible." In African American Religious Studies, ed. Gayraud Wilmore. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.

Pointing out that the Black experience in America is distinct from the Jewish-Christian experience in Palestine, this author does see the story of the African American experience as a "faith-experience" that creates a strong identification with scripture. In this work, Bennett credits Black theology with making a significant contribution to the formation and articulation of the existing expressions of faith that grow out of the Black religious experience.

Brown, Kelly D. "Womanist Theology: What Is Its Relationship to Black Theology?" In Black Theology: A Documentary History--Volume II, 1980-1992, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 290-299. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

Brown discusses the distinctiveness of Black women's experience and the "spirituality of survival" that has undergirded their fight for liberation. Asserting that the sexism that characterizes Black theology is just as dehumanizing as the racism of traditional and feminist theologies, this writer calls for a multidimensional analysis of all oppressive structures.

Bundesen, Lynne. The Woman's Guide to the Bible. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1993.

This is a commentary for women which not only reflects on the lives of women in the Bible, but it also enables contemporary Christian women to engage in meaningful and authentic Biblical interpretation .

Cannon, Katie Geneva. "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness." In Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Letty M. Russell, 30-40. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985.

Cannon credits the biblical interpretative process of the Black Church as being the foundation of Black women's struggle for survival.

Cannon, Katie Geneva. "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church." In Searching the Scriptures--Volume One: a Feminist Introduction, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 326-337. Crossroad: New York, 1993.

This essay offers a very helpful formula for "womanist preaching." Claiming that Black preaching has ignored a womanist interpretation of Scripture, and that womanist theological studies have disregarded homiletics, Cannon calls for a blending of the two areas. She suggests that an interfacing of Isaac R. Clark's tools and methodologies on Black preaching with the feminist liberationist critiques of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza will yield a hermeneutic that affirms and liberates Black women.

Claypool, John R. The Preaching Event: Lyman Beecher Lectures. Waco: Word Books, 1980.

Claypool proposes that the preaching event is a most critical moment in the life of the Church and the Christian. Thus, he charges the preacher to proclaim the Gospel in such a way that it makes a difference in the lives of the people who hear. As he explores the "what, why, how and when of preaching," his probing insight gives new definition to the preacher and the preaching task.

Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Patricia Hill Collins explores Black feminist thought, past and present, as she gives insight and definition to the Black female experience in America. She challenges White male dominated interpretations of the world, and confronts White women's insensitivity to the realities of African American women. Though this

study is a compilation of Collins' sociological findings, Black Feminist Thought makes a critical contribution to formation and articulation of womanist theology.

Copeland, M. Shawn. "'Wading Through Many Sorrows': Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective," In A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering, ed. Emilie Townes, 109-129. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

In this three-part essay, Copeland discusses the reality of suffering in the lives of Black women. Using Black women slave narratives to explore Black women's experiences of suffering, she then concludes that the Christian religion is the primary resource for womanist resistance to suffering.

Evans, James H., Jr. We Have Been Believers. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

This book examines the theological methodologies of Black theologians as they have explored the Black experience and God's revelation to Black folk. He claims that the Bible is an "imaginative text" whose meaning is seen most clearly by the "marginalized and the powerless," and constructs a theology that truly reflects the essence of the Black religious experience.

Felder, Cain Hope. Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989.

This author provides new insights and "corrections" for biblical misconceptions and interpretations that have traditionally excluded and suppressed people of color in the biblical text.

Felder, Cain Hope. "The Bible, Re-Contextualization and the Black Religious Experience," In African American Religious Studies, ed. Gayraud Wilmore, 155-171. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.

Felder makes the claim that Africans in America and in the diaspora have identified with the biblical witness, largely because they have felt that many of the stories reflect their existential reality. Rejecting Eurocentric exegesis, historiography and hermeneutics, he calls for a fundamental revision of

traditional methodologies, and proposes a recontextualization of the biblical text as a means of uncovering some truths about the Black religious experience in Africa.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation. *Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.*

Traditional biblical interpretation is challenged by Schüssler-Fiorenza, as she challenges readers to understand the imposed restrictions of a male written and translated Bible, and the hermeneutic that evolved. She proposes interpretive methodologies that would yield a feminist biblical hermeneutic, rooted in women's experience and liberation theology.

_____. In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins. *New York: Crossroads, 1983.*

Essential reading for the feminist or womanist hermeneut. Schüssler Fiorenza shakes the foundation of androcentric Christian tradition, as she offers fresh, radical insight into biblical interpretation. Her feminist scholarship yields "a historical-critical reconstruction of women's history and women's contributions to early Christian beginnings." This author's analyses and interpretive methodologies truly restore women to their rightful place in biblical history.

Forbes, James. The Holy Spirit and Preaching. *Nashville: Abingdon, 1989.*

Addressing the tension that exists between scholarship and the Spirit, Forbes concludes that sermon preparation and delivery are incomplete until the preacher receives "the anointing." Effective, life-changing preaching will happen only when the preacher is "equipped" by the Holy Spirit.

Fortune, Marie Marshall. Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin. *New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983.*

This discussion examines sexual violence, its social and religious roots, and the consequences of the Christian church's silence. Fortune challenges the religious community to open its eyes to incest and sexual abuse and to accept its responsibility to provide the appropriate pastoral care for women who are the victims of the "unmentionable sin."

Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. "'Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless': Power, Gender, and Community in an Afro-centric Biblical Tradition." Semeia 47, (1989): 57-85.

This article by Gilkes reminds us that the notion of a genderless God has always been present in the theology of Black folk. Claiming that the understanding of God as both mother and father, sister and brother is an Afrocentric idea that is rooted in the oral tradition of Black people in worship, this writer shows how Psalm 68 and the imagery derived from its reading contributes to the idea that our ancestors saw God as the God who would empower the powerless.

Glaz, Maxine and Moessner, Jeanne Stevenson. Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

This book is an invaluable collection of articles designed to help equip "caregivers" to provide appropriate pastoral care to women. Each article explores an aspect of the female experience, focuses on the gender needs of women, and offers theoretical and practical considerations for understanding and overpowering those forces that would oppress women.

Gonzalez, Justo L. and Gonzalez, Catherine. Liberation Preaching--The Pulpit and the Oppressed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.

Demonstrating that the Bible is written from the perspective of the "powerless," these authors proceed to challenge their readers to discover and uncover the obvious biases of White male biblical interpreters, as they adopt a theology of liberation that demands a "liberating" appropriation of the text by the oppressed.

Grant, Jacquelyn. White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus. Atlanta: Scholars, 1989.

Grant's womanist thinking and personal insight on how African American women see Jesus is a significant contribution to theological studies. She reflects on the evolution of feminist christology and its limitations, and concludes that Black women's experience and thinking about their Jesus is so different from that of White women that it is only an articulation of Black women's theology and christology that will speak to the situation of Black women.

Hoyt, Thomas Jr. "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship," In Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. Cain Felder, 17-39. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

The Black experience in America has influenced and shaped biblical interpretation, but Hoyt claims that the tendency to "read whatever we want into the text is a problem." He insists that hermeneutics should evolve from historical findings and a relating of present experiences to the text.

Loewenberg, Bert James and Ruth Bogin. Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976.

This book reveals the life experiences and thought development of some creative, socially conscious nineteenth century Black women.

Martin, Clarice J. "Womanist Interpretation of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation." Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, vol.6, no. 2 (Fall, 1990): 41-61.

While feminist biblical interpretation has always had a threefold focus--gender, class, and language, this article addresses the "quadruocentric" interests of womanist biblical interpretation. For African American theologians the issue of "race" is crucial and indispensable to the biblical interpretive process .

Clarice Martin sends the biblical scholar on a quest for holistic and inclusive translations and interpretations by challenging them to amplify the voices of all of those whose voices have been silenced by race, class, and gender issues.

McNaron, Toni A.H. and Yarrow Morgan. Voices in the Night--Women Speaking About Incest. Pittsburg: Cleis Press, 1989.

Women speak out about their experiences of incest. This collection of writings by incest survivors exposes the evil that is rarely talked about or written about, especially in the first person. For victims of incest and abuse it serves as a testimony to their own experience of pain and powerlessness; it sensitizes and empowers others to be moved to action.

Mitchell, Henry H. "Toward a Theology of Black Preaching." In African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore,. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.

Mitchell explores the techniques and the "theology of Black preaching." He sees the Black preacher as one who must interpret, celebrate, and validate the experiences of Black people.

Myers, William H. "The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African-American Biblical Student." In Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. Cain H. Felder, 40-56. Minneapolis:Fortress, 1991.

A thought-provoking essay! Myers discusses the dilemma that African American biblical students face when they find themselves in Eurocentric seminaries. The assertion is that Eurocentric hermeneutical methodologies conflict with the African American experience and the believing community's canonical perspective. The writer argues for the utilization of new reading and interpretive strategies among African American scholars and challenges them to advocate for the inclusion of this new perspective in the pedagogical content and structure of religious learning institutions.

Newsom, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. The Women's Bible Commentary. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.

This anthology of the writings of female scholars provide biblical interpretation from the side of women. An analysis of each book of the Bible and an introduction to some of the women characters contained therein, affords female Bible readers an opportunity to "see themselves" in the biblical text. Likewise, it offers male readers some insight into interpretive principles that are fair and inclusive.

Osiek, Carolyn. "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives." In Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, 93-105. Atlanta: Scholars, 1985.

This essay examines some of the interpretive methodologies of feminist biblical scholars who confront the patriarchy and andocentric characteristic of traditional biblical interpretation. She suggests that there are five feminist hermeneutic responses to an oppressive, misogynist biblical tradition--rejectionist, loyalist, revisionist, sublimationist, and liberationist, and concludes that inherent in feminist Bible interpretation is a re-definition of sin (as patriarchy) and a re-ordering of human society.

Park, Andrew Sung. The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

Park introduces to the Christian Church the Asian concept of "Han." He argues that the Christian Church has traditionally focused on the sin and salvation of the sinner, but has failed to give attention to the pain and suffering of those who have been the victims of sin. He charges that the Church will not fulfill its mission to humankind until it understands that reconciliation with God and humanity cannot occur until those who have been wounded have been healed.

Reid, Stephen Breck. Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990.

This volume challenges African American Christians to develop experience-centered strategies for reading and interpreting the Bible. Committed to the notion that the Bible informs the Black church experience, Reid theorizes that Bible reading is authentic only when it is applied to various aspects of African American culture and tradition.

Redmond, Sheila A. "Christian 'Virtues' and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse," In Christiany, Patriarchy, and Abuse--A Feminist Critique, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, 67-88. New York: Pilgrim, 1989.

Redmond argues that the Christian Church and its patriarchal structures have contributed to the abuse that is so prevalent in this society. Not only has the Church's biblical analysis created an atmosphere for the abuse and subjugation of women, but it has created attitudes and assumptions that hinder the healing of the victims.

Smith, Christine M. Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989.

Using women's experience and imagination, Smith urges preachers, women and men, to appropriate a feminist perspective into the interpretive task and preaching moment.

_____. Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.

Smith shares the belief that preaching should interpret contemporary situations in the world, and should project appropriate responses to the evils of sexism, racism, ageism, classism, handicappism and heterosexism. She proposes that the preacher must weep about the radical evils that plague our society, call the church to confession, and challenge them to resist the attitudes and structures that oppress, exploit and dehumanize.

Tate, W. Randolph. Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991.

This work by Tate offers three vital methodologies for Bible-reading and biblical interpretation--1) Author-Centered Approaches to Meaning, 2) Text-Centered Approaches of Meaning , 3) Reader-Centered Approaches to Meaning. He shows the hermeneut how to integrate the past and the present, as she or he moves toward an informed perception of the text.

Townes, Emilie M., ed. A Troubling in My Soul--Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

This collection of essays by African American female scholars makes a profound contribution to the study womanist theology and Christian perspectives on suffering. By examining the structural evils inherent in racism, sexism and classism and their impact on Black women's experience, the contributors to this volume speak to those issues that feminist theology and Black liberation theology overlook.

Weems, Renita Jean. "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible." In Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. Cain Hope Felder, 57-77. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

Renita J. Weems explores the reading strategies and non-traditional methodologies of African American women who still regard the Bible as a tool of liberation. She shows the relationship between Black women's experience and their interpretation of the Bible to which they are devoted.

_____. Just A Sister Away. San Diego: Luramedia, 1988.

In this writing, Weems offers a reconstruction and a womanist interpretation of nine biblical stories. She takes traditional biblical stories and provides new, untraditional perspectives, with a special sensitivity to African American women's voices. This work gives significant insight to female relationships of biblical women, while it speaks to the relationships of their contemporary counterparts.

Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

In this writing, Williams relates the poverty, exploitation, sexism and God-encounter characteristic of African-American women's experience to the experiences of the Old Testament character, Hagar. This author provides a reliable discussion of womanist theological thought and its tension with Black liberation theology, feminist theology and the African American Church.

_____. "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices." In Black Theology: A Documentary History --Volume II (1980-1992). eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 265-272. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

Using Alice Walker's definition of "womanist" as a foundation, Williams expands and explores the definition of womanist theology. Her theological reflections are rooted in the belief that Black women's theology must reflect Black women's historical, cultural, and religious experiences, and must be articulated in their own voices.

Wimbush, Vincent L. "The Bible and African American: An Outline of an Interpretative History." In Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. Cain Hope Felder, 81-97. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

Wimbush attempts to give a framework for the historical interpretive methodologies of African Americans as they have "lived through their readings of the Bible." He theorizes that biblical readings and interpretations have always corresponded to and confronted the socio-political-economic realities of African Americans in this country.

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APPENDIX B

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

PART I

1. Code Name or Number_____

2. Age _____ 3. Marital Status_____

4. If you have children, list their gender and ages._____

_____

_____

5. If you have step-children, list their gender and ages._____

_____

_____

PART II

1. If you are presently married, rate your satisfaction with the marriage.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
DISSATISFIED				**SATISFIED**			**WELL-PLEASED**

Explain:_____

_____

_____

If you are divorced or separated, how would you characterize the separation?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
NASTY				**UNFRIENDLY**			**FRIENDLY**

Explain:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. If you had the opportunity, what things in your life would you do differently? Tell Why.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. What things do you like about yourself? _____

5. What things do you dislike about yourself? _____

6. What one thing would you most like to change about yourself? Tell why. _____

7. Tell me about your secret self -- the you that nobody knows. _____

8. What persons in your life have hurt you most? Discuss.

9. What persons in your life have helped you most? Discuss.

10. If you could come face to face with God on today, what three things would you ask God to help you understand about yourself and you life?

11. What has made you cry or want to cry lately? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

12. In what context do you weep (when and where)? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Complete the following statement.

13. I am the victim of _____

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

PART III

1. What do you listen for when you hear a sermon?_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. What difference, if any, have you observed between male preachers and female preachers?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Name and describe the most memorable sermon (s) that you have heard. Discuss why it impacted your life.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Name the preacher who preached the sermon._____

APPENDIX C

SERMON EVALUATION FORM

SERMON EVALUATION FORM

PART I

The Preacher_____

The Sermon Title _____

The Sermon Scripture_____

PART II

1. Did you have prior knowledge of the sermonic scripture? (Had you read it or heard it read before this experience?)

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

If yes, what was your prior thinking or understanding about this scripture?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. How had this scripture spoken to you and your situation, prior to this sermonic experience?

3. What was the good news of the text (before the sermon)?

4. Did this sermon give you any new insight into the text?

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

If yes, explain:

5. Did this sermon speak to you or your situation in any particular way? If so, explain?

6. What, if anything, was liberating or empowering about the sermon as it relates to your life experiences?

7. As a woman, how did this sermon make you feel?

8. Had you heard this text preached before?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If yes, by whom? _____

9. How was this last interpretation of the scripture different or similar to the previous one(s)?

10. Give any additional comments that you might have about the sermon or the interpretation of the text.

APPENDIX D

FINAL EVALUATION FORM

FINAL EVALUATION FORM

1. How do you see your painful experiences, past and present, as having impacted your life negatively?

2. Do you see any good that has come out of your painful experiences?

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

Explain: _____

3. As it relates to the experiences that have made you a "Hurting Woman," rate how you see yourself at present.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
VICTIM				**SURVIVOR**			**OVERCOMER**

Explain: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Has your perception of yourself changed any over the last year?

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

If yes, explain how you see yourself differently. _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. If there has been a change in your self-perception, to what do you attribute these changes?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Since you have been involved in the "Sermon-Evaluation-Process", how do you listen to sermons differently?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Have any sermons that you have listened to ministered healing to your "Hurting Places".

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

If yes, give some sermon titles and the names of those men or women who preached them.

_____

_____

_____

8. Tell how these sermons have ministered to you.

9. Have these sermons challenged or motivated you in any way?

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

If yes, explain.

10. Have these sermons been directly responsible for a change in your attitude or behavior?

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

If yes, tell how your attitude and behavior have changed. _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

11. Has your thinking about God changed in the last year?

YES ☐ **NO** ☐

Explain : _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

12. What are your attitudinal and behavioral goals for the coming years?

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